

I'll Never Set Foot in That House Again!

Author Milli-gram

Illustrator Yuki Kana





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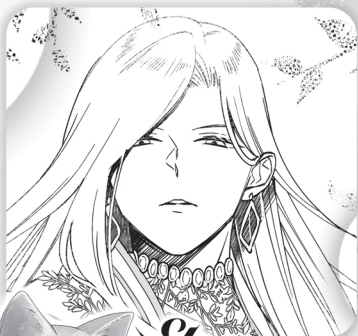
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Glen

A young man possessing a Sage-level [Appraisal] Skill who visited Baron Eucharis's estate for an appraisal. He helps Chelsea after learning about the abuse she endured.



Ele

The Spirit King. Appeared from the "Spirit Tree of Origin" that Chelsea created with her Skill. Taking her as his master, they formed a contract. Normally takes the form of a kitten.



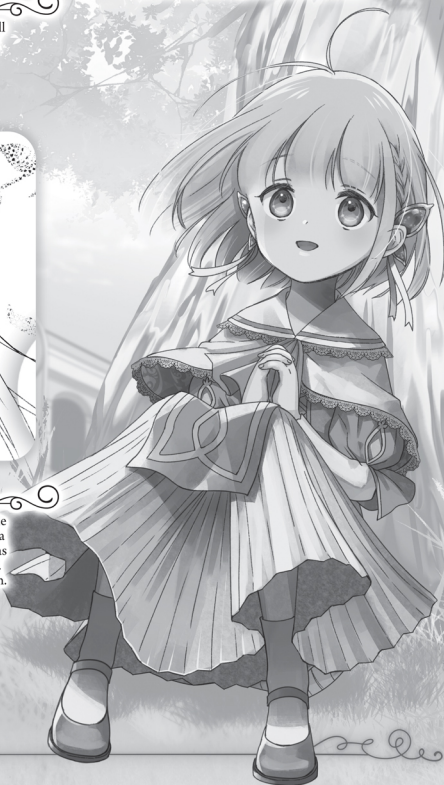
Characters

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Character Introductions

Chelsea

A noble's daughter who was called a failure and tyrannized by her mother and younger twin sister. After awakening to the brand-new Skill [Seed Creation], she came to the Royal Research Institute.





Root

A Communication Spirit who gained the form of a little boy after being named by Chelsea. Granted her the power of telepathy after forming a contract with her.



Micah

A foxwoman Chelsea met in the Radzuel Empire. A wonderful chef, who was brought back to Chronowize to be Chelsea's personal chef.



World Map

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Prologue

My name is Chelsea. I'm the adopted daughter of Margrave Sargent and fiancée of His Highness Prince Glenarnold, younger brother to the king of Chronowize.

About eight months have passed since I brought the Martec Republic's land back to life from a mana drought, planted another cutting of the Spirit Tree, and summoned the second Great Spirit. Right now, I was staying at the Sargent family's villa in the capital of Chronowize.

Typically, most members of the Sargent family stayed in our territory to the northwest in order to fight the monsters who poured forth from the Demonic Forest, but our capital villa was kept for when we needed to take care of our social responsibilities. The villa had a very large hall, sizable enough that you could host over thirty visitors with some room to spare. Standing in front of the door to that huge hall, in a long dress with a defined waist, was...me.

Lord Glen stood by my side as my escort, looking down at me intently. "You're even prettier than usual today, Chelsea."

I felt my face heat up at the sudden compliment. The dress was much more fancy and extravagant than what I usually wore.

"Thank you..." I replied bashfully.

With a smile on his face, Lord Glen offered his arm and said, "Let's go inside."

"Yes."

Resting my hand on his offered arm, we had the servants open the hall door for us. As soon as it opened, a cheerful tune began to play. As we made our way into the hall, everyone in attendance shouted at once.

"Happy birthday!"

"Thank you very much," I replied, blushing a little bit.

Today was my fifteenth birthday, and my aunt-slash-adopted mother Ariel and Lord Glen had organized a celebration for me. The guests were people I was involved with, and others who were friendly with Margrave Sargent's family.

Led forward by Lord Glen, we headed towards the large table in the center of the room. On it were tons of boxes of different sizes, all tied with ribbons.

Lord Glen leaned in and whispered in my ear, "Those are all your

birthday presents.”

In the Kingdom of Chronowize, it was customary to hold large birthday celebrations for someone at age twelve when they’d gained their Skills, and fifteen, where they’d become of age.

Three years ago, I was still being abused at the Eucharis barony, so there had been no celebration then. There had been a table packed with presents, but they were all to celebrate my half-sister, who is two days younger than me.

This is the first time...I’ve had so many presents all to myself... I was so touched that I didn’t know how to put it into words. My emotions started to get the best of me, and I began to shake. As I did, Mother Ariel approached me.

“You don’t have to force yourself to say anything,” she said. “We can all tell exactly how you feel from how you look right now.”

At her words, I looked around the hall and saw that most were smiling. Some were even tearing up. I was shocked to see their reactions, and all I could muster was a nod.

Mother smiled. “Now, in accordance with the custom, I’ll give you your coming-of-age flower gift, my precious daughter, Chelsea.”

I moved away from Lord Glen and stood up straight right in front of Mother, happy that she called me her “precious daughter.”

A flower gift was a present from a parent to their child, given upon their coming-of-age in the hopes that it helped them with their desired profession. Children who wanted to be knights might get a sword, while children who desired to become seamstresses might get a sewing kit. In my case, since I was already working at the Royal Research Institute as a research fellow, my gift had apparently been chosen to help with my current job, rather than something else.

The butler who managed the Sargent Margraviate’s townhouse carefully carried a tray with a thin box that would fit in my hands to Mother. She took the box, handing it to me.

“Thank you very much.”

“Please, open it!”

Heart pounding, I undid the ribbon and slowly took the lid off of the box. Inside was a blue pen, the same aqua color as Lord Glen’s eyes. When I lifted the pen, it felt strange—somehow both warm and cold.

“This pen is a magical tool that will let you write and erase on anything,” Mother explained, smiling. “Your job is using your Skill to create seeds, isn’t it? I’ve heard that in order to do that, you need to draw up blueprints. I thought that this might be quite useful.”

My Skill was [Seed Creation], which let me make any seed that I wished for. For seeds that already existed, all I had to do was think or say the name of it to create one. For seeds that didn’t exist, I needed

to draw up blueprints and read them repeatedly, or else I couldn't effectively use my Skill. Since I'd drawn up blueprints in various situations so far, I was happy to be given a pen. And, if it could write on anything, that would make investigating and researching my Skill anywhere easier.

As I thought to myself how happy I was, Mother clasped her hands together amusedly.

"Oh, yes! I've heard that this pen can even write in the air!"

"Huh?!"

"I've been wondering how it worked. Would you be able to show me?"

Nodding, I used the aqua pen-shaped magic tool to write my name in the air. The name "Chelsea Sargent" was now floating in front of me. I could hear the party guests expressing their surprise.

"Now, rubbing the letters with the pen's opposite tip will erase them."

Doing as she said, and rubbing the rounded opposite tip over the letters, they disappeared.

"Thank you so much for giving me something so amazing!" I thanked her again, and she gave me a tight hug in response.

Then, she whispered in my ear, "It was His Highness that prepared the pen. Thank him in secret, later." I gave her a tiny nod back, and she pulled away. "I'm so glad you liked it! Again, happy fifteenth birthday, Chelsea."

After Mother spoke, the guests in attendance all gave me their well-wishes once more.

The aqua pen I was given as my flower gift had something like a clip on it and could be attached to my chest like a corsage. Putting it on, I went to greet everyone in attendance.

First up was Her Highness the Queen. His Majesty was unable to attend due to a visiting envoy from the Holy Country of Celesark to the north. Next was Duke Bazrack, younger brother of the previous king. His granddaughter had made a full recovery, and had married the other day. After that were the Chief of the Royal Research Academy, Lady Mirabel, and Lord Tris. All three usually wore robes, but today they were in dresses and a tuxedo. I wasn't used to seeing them like that, but I didn't find it strange either.

My personal maids, Gina and Martha, and my personal chef, Miss Micah the foxwoman, had come as well. Gina was actually the daughter of a viscount, and Martha was the daughter of a baron. All three were wearing dresses that I'd gifted to them. Miss Micah didn't usually wear dresses, but it looked wonderful on her.

"Happy birthday, Lady Chelsea!" came a voice.

When I turned to see who had congratulated me, I saw Lady Noel,

daughter of Marquis Wisteria, with a great big smile.

“Thank you, Lady Noel,” I said with a smile of my own.

Lady Noel’s eyebrows slanted downward, and she began to sway back and forth as she covered her mouth. “Lady Chelsea, you’re really just so adorable...!”

Seeing her expressions change so quickly never gets old... I thought, then said, “You’re much cuter, Lady Noel.”

“Then let’s just say we’re *both* adorable!”

She didn’t deny what either of us had said. Touched by her kindness, I lifted a hand to my lips and giggled, just like her.

Once I had greeted everyone who had attended the party, I headed back to the table covered in gifts. Then, I thanked Lord Glen, who had been by my side the whole time.

“Thank you so much for escorting me today.”

“I’m glad to be able to help my fiancée,” he replied with a smile.

“Ah, Mother told me that you were the one who prepared the pen,” I said, touching the aqua pen on the left side of my chest.

His face morphed into something similar to a little boy who had their pranks exposed, then he looked away.

“She came to me asking what I thought she should give you for your coming-of-age flower gift... I just ended up giving her the thing I was planning on gifting you myself.”

Does he mean he had it ready even before then? I thought. “Could it be that the magic stone used in this pen is the same one you bought in the Martec Republic?”

Lord Glen nodded. The town at the base of the mountain where Simurgh lived had a dungeon, and a shop selling the magical stones could also be found there.

“So the present you were talking about using the stone for was the pen,” I said, touching the gift again.

Suddenly, my older brother Marx walked up holding a tray like a server. He was the second son of Margrave Sargent, and the Deputy Commander of the Second Order of Knights.

“Happy birthday, Chelsea,” he said.

“Thank you, Brother Marx,” I replied with a smile.

Saix and Felix, my other older brothers, popped their heads out from behind Marx. Saix was the eldest, and next in line to be Margrave. He usually stayed in the Margraviate. Felix was the third son, and was on track to become Saix’s aid. While they were all technically my cousins, because I was adopted, I could easily call them my brothers.

“Happy birthday.”

“Congratulations, Chelsea!”

“Thank you both,” I said, smiling at Saix and Felix.

Despite being brothers, all three of them had different hair and eye colors. However, when lined up together, it was clear they were related due to their facial shape, how they carried themselves, and the gestures they made.

They all looked at each other with grins on their faces before they started talking.

“We were thinking you might want to try alcohol now that you’re an adult,” said Brother Saix, pointing to the three glasses on the tray Marx held.

“We all wanted you to try our recommendations since it’s such a special day, but we couldn’t all decide on one...” Brother Marx said with a wry smile.

“And so, we decided we’d let you make the choice,” finished Brother Felix, smiling.

In the Kingdom of Chronowize, you were allowed to drink alcohol once you were of age.

“What drinks do you have?” I asked, lured by how they said it was in commemoration of my coming-of-age.

They introduced their drinks one by one. Brother Saix’s pick was a refreshingly flavored bitter liquor, the drink of drinks. Brother Marx had picked a sweet drink that smelled of fruit, less alcoholic so you’d be less likely to have a hangover the next day. Brother Felix had brought a liquor that was so sweet you might mistake it for juice, that even beginners might end up chugging.

They all sound interesting...

As I wondered which to pick, Lord Glen murmured from beside me, “You get drunk easily, so you should go for the least alcoholic one.”

How does he know how I handle alcohol when I’ve never drank it before? Is it written in my status? With Lord Glen’s odd advice in mind, I decided on Brother Marx’s weak drink.

“I’ll try this one.”

“I’m glad you picked mine!” Marx said, giving me the Order of Knights’ trademark grin.

“I’m disappointed, but I guess there’s nothing I can do about it,” Brother Felix said, slumping down dejectedly.

Brother Saix then spoke up, “Why don’t I try your drink then? You can try mine too.”

“That sounds interesting!” Felix replied, lifting Saix’s suggested refreshingly bitter liquor.

Saix picked up the sweet juice-like liquor in return before saying, “Cheers!”

“Huh? What about me?” Marx objected, still holding the tray. But

our other two brothers ignored him and downed their drinks.

“Whew... The aftertaste is really bad. Really refreshing though...!”

“You were right. This is so sweet I would’ve mistaken it for juice.”

After hearing their opinions, I lifted my own glass to my lips. It smelled fruity. I sipped it, and the gentle sweetness spread through my mouth before giving me an odd, sweet yet bitter aftertaste.

Hm? I feel like I’ve tasted this before... Will I remember if I drink more? I thought, taking another few sips before it came to me. *It has the same aftertaste as those liqueur chocolates!* Thinking back, I was missing some memories from then. *So this is why Lord Glen told me to pick the weak liquor.*

I wasn’t sure if I’d forget what was happening or not, but I was still conscious...if a little floaty. This must have been what people meant when they said they were drunk.

While I basked in the floaty feeling, Lord Glen looked down at my face. “Are you okay, Chelsea?”

“I’m...fine,” I replied slowly. “The drink tasted good... It’s fun how floaty I feel.”

I began to giggle, and Lord Glen quickly wrapped his arm around my waist to support me. When I looked over at my brothers, they all looked surprised.

“The Sargent family is full of heavy drinkers, so we’d thought Chelsea would have some resistance, but...” said Brother Saix, looking meek as Brother Marx nodded along.

“You must take after your father. I didn’t think you’d be this much of a lightweight,” commented Brother Felix, taking the glass from my hand.

I wanted to complain that I wasn’t finished drinking it, but saying the words felt so bothersome that I just stayed silent.

“Oh my, are you drunk, Chelsea?”

I could hear Mother’s voice. I tried to look over at her, but I ended up stumbling. Lord Glen quickly caught me.

“Thank...you...” I said, even slower than last time.

Lord Glen gave me a dry smile. “Looks like you really are drunk. Let’s rest for a bit.”

I nodded, sitting down on a sofa at the edge of the hall. From there, I vacantly looked around the room.

The guests were all chatting, drinking, eating... Everything I’d missed on my twelfth birthday was here. It was because Lord Glen took me out of the barony that I was able to have my fifteenth birthday celebrated. *It’s really nice to have people celebrate your birthday.*

I quietly giggled to myself, and Lord Glen looked at me in confusion. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m just so happy...people are celebrating *me*...” I replied, saying what I was thinking.

He gave me a soft smile. It was the same one he’d given me when we first met, and it made me feel at ease.

“We’ll celebrate it next year too. And the next. And every year after that.”

“Then I’ll celebrate your birthday too next year...and the next...and forever after that,” I said, still slowly.

Lord Glen just covered his mouth with a hand.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He replied bashfully, “I was just so happy to hear you say that that I started grinning.”

Did I really say something that made him that happy? I wondered, still vacantly.

Miss Micah came up to us, carrying a glass. “Chelsea, you’ve gotta drink lots of water when you’re drunk~”

Taking the glass from her, I slowly sipped it. It tasted slightly of lemon...with a hint of honey too.

“Thank you...”

A while after that, I started sobering up, and the floaty feeling subsided.

“I’m okay now,” I said, and Lord Glen began to stare at the spot above my head. He must have been using his [Appraisal] Skill to check if I really was okay or not.

Then, he took my hand and helped me up from the couch. From there, we walked back to the table full of presents, holding hands.

Mother spoke up when we arrived. “Ah, Chelsea, perfect timing. I’m thinking it’s about time for the party to end.”

I looked around the hall and saw that we’d gone through quite a bit of the prepared food and drinks.

“Happy times pass in a flash, huh?” I murmured, and Mother smiled happily.

“If you thought they were happy times, your mother thinks so too.” A warm feeling spread in my chest as she treated me just as if I was her real daughter. “Now, give everyone your closing remarks.”

After giving Mother a nod, I straightened up and faced the guests in the hall. Noticing my movements, they all looked towards me.

“Thank you all so much for taking the time out of your busy day to come to my fifteenth birthday party. I am glad to have spent such a happy time with all of you. Please, do continue to watch over me warmly,” I said, repeating the closing remarks I’d practiced so much, and ending the party.

1. Observer?

The day after my birthday party, I headed towards His Majesty the King's office. Lord Glen had always gone with me because I was a minor, but since I was an adult from today forward, I needed to go alone. *I'm an adult now, so I need to do my best!*

After I entered the office and greeted His Majesty, he asked me to sit on the sofa. I sat down on the three-seater, with a low table between the king and me. Once His Majesty's maids had set out tea and sweets for two, they silently left the room. The only ones who were left were His Majesty, me, and the Royal Guard Knights.

"There are two things I want to talk to you about," the king said after taking a sip of tea. "Before I start on the first, how much do you know about the Holy Country of Celesark? Tell me."

I nodded, before reciting what I'd been taught. "The Holy Country of Celesark is located to the north and inhabited by a race of people known as 'Winged Ones.' They live double the lifespan of a human and have the remnants of wings on their backs. The country is protected by the Grand Saintess chosen through the Floral Crucible, with a government of politicians chosen by the people."

After I spoke, the king put a hand to his chin and nodded. "And you must also know that Celesark's Grand Saintess changes once every ten years?"

"Yes. I learned that the first Grand Saintess who founded the Holy Country said another should take over before their protective powers wane."

"You've studied well."

I wasn't expecting to get a compliment from the king, so I was shocked. I was happy too though, and a smile pulled at my cheeks.

"This year is the year they'll change. And that change requires an observer from another country." I nodded at his words as he continued. "The first thing I wanted to tell you was that they've approached us asking for you to be that observer."

"Me?" I immediately asked, wondering to myself, *Why?*

In response to my question, His Majesty began chuckling like a demon lord.

"With what you've succeeded with so far, it would be strange if they *hadn't* asked you," he explained, listing them off. "First of all, in our Kingdom of Chronowize... You saved the life of Duke Bazrack's

granddaughter—Duke Bazrack being the younger brother of the previous king. You were also appointed as a research fellow. From the perspective of another country, you're nearly on the same level as royalty."

Now that he mentioned it, the white robe I'd received when I was appointed research fellow had a purple stole. Purple was called the color of royalty in Chronowize, and for nobles, the only way you would be allowed to wear it was if it was given to you by royalty. I finally realized that being given that purple stole had been a show of my connection to the royal family.

"In the Radzuel Empire, you planted pumpkin seeds that would always sprout, even in the land ravaged by miasma, and thus saved them from famine. It was thanks to that that you were given the title of 'Savior of the Radzuel Empire.'"

I'd received the title from Lord Royz, Emperor of the Radzuel Empire, and was treated as a friend of the Beastmen. Thanks to that title, I was able to read the Beastmen's language, and was allowed to come and go freely from the country.

"The Martec Republic's land was desolate due to an unnatural mana drought, and not only did you narrow down the cause, but you sowed seeds that brought that land back to life, and became known as the 'Saintess of Abundance.'"

I'd only meant to make and plant seeds that would return mana to the earth, but for some reason it had brought the dried earth back to life. Because of that, I'd been called the Saintess of Abundance, and gained an alias. I hadn't really worried about it since I'd heard that aliases didn't really have any special effects, so I didn't expect it would come up now.

"Each country recognizes your achievements. Understood?"

"Yes..."

It was kind of embarrassing to have someone tell me how amazing the things I'd done were.

"So? Will you be their observer?"

I tilted my head again at his words.

"What role does an observer play?"

When I asked that, His Majesty gave a look as if he'd made a mistake. Lord Glen had the same look sometimes, and the sibling resemblance was strong. I had to give a tiny giggle at that.

"I hadn't explained that yet, had I? From what I've heard of it, you'll become friendly with the candidates for the position of Grand Saintess, and take part in the Floral Crucible."

Becoming friendly with the candidates didn't seem like it would be that hard, but...the problem was taking part in the trial.

"Celesark keeps information regarding the Floral Crucible

confidential, so I don't know the details. But..." His Majesty paused, looking off into the distance. "Ten years ago, when my queen returned from being the observer, she bragged and said that the trial was a 'fun, once-in-a-lifetime experience.'"

So Her Highness was the observer for the last trial! If it was so fun that she'd been boasting about it, I wanted to do it, no matter how difficult it may have been! In what way was it fun? My curiosity was piqued.

Before I realized it, I blurted out, "Please, let me accept the request to become the observer!"

"Aha, so you'll do it. The current Grand Saintess will be pleased. I was told to give you this envelope if you accepted. Inside are the important points about being an observer, among other things," the king said, passing me a big envelope that had been on the low table between us. "Make sure to read it with those who will accompany you."

After I took it, I quickly used the Spirit Tree bracelet on my left wrist to store it in my personal storage in the Spirit World.

"The second thing I wanted to discuss is regarding the living space within the citadel, which is to be given to you for becoming a research fellow upon coming of age. But I'll wait to give it to you until you come back after being an observer."

Now that I thought back to it, I did remember being told something like that when I became a research fellow.

"Has the location been chosen yet?" I asked.

The king smirked. "There are a few candidates. But they're all great places, so you can expect great things."

I was looking forward to where it might be!

+ + +

After leaving the king's office, I headed straight for my personal lab in the Royal Research Institute. When I opened the door, I saw Lord Glen already waiting for me inside.

"Looks like you accepted the request," he said, giving me a soft smile. He gestured for me to sit down on the three-seater sofa.

"Why yes, I did. How did you know?" I asked as I took a seat.

"I heard it from His Majesty."

"Oh, I see."

The king had probably teased Lord Glen as he told him. While I imagined the scenario, I got the sealed envelope back from the Spirit Tree bracelet on my left wrist.

"Ah, His Majesty gave me this envelope and told me to look through it with the people who would be accompanying me."

I moved to open it, but Lord Glen stopped me with a hand.

“While I really want to know what it says, let’s eat first.”

“Huh?”

While I sat there with my head tilted in wonder, Lord Glen stood up, then rang a bell sitting on the dining table. A second later, Gina, Martha, and Miss Micah walked in, pushing carts. Gina put a white tablecloth across the nearby dining table in a practiced manner, while Martha began making our tea.

As I watched from the sofa, Lord Glen held out his hand towards me. I took his hand and followed him closer to the table.

Martha spoke to me, having finished making the tea. “It must have taken a fair amount of courage to see His Majesty all on your own, did it not?”

It really had... I thought, then answered, “I was very nervous.”

Then, with a smile, Gina chimed in, “That is exactly why we prepared this for you.”

At the same time as Gina spoke, Miss Micah set a covered tray down in front of me and removed the lid. On the tray was flan, my favorite sweet ever, along with bite-sized chunks of various fruits, tiny pancakes, and a bowl full of cream.

“This is a reward for how hard you must’ve tried~! Today’s snack is flan à la mode~!”

“Wow!” I gasped. The snack looked so delicious that my jaw dropped. But a newly-of-age lady should never leave her mouth so agape and yelp like that!

I quickly slapped a hand over my mouth as Lord Glen gave me a blank stare.

“Um... I’m an adult now, so opening my mouth and making noises like that is embarrassing...” I whispered, my face reddening.

He gently wrapped an arm around my back and pulled me close. “I’d personally like it if you’d let yourself be happy when you’re happy, just like you’ve always done.”

Oh, I can’t say no when he looks at me so pleadingly... I fretted. *But I’m an adult, so...* After taking a moment to calm myself down, I looked up at Lord Glen.

“Just with you then... I want to act like a proper adult lady everywhere else,” I managed to say, only for him to hug me tightly.

“It’s nice seeing you try so hard to act mature too.” He responded so suddenly that I felt my face light on fire. I must’ve been bright red. “Let’s sit and eat.”

I couldn’t make myself respond, so I just nodded. Then, I took a spoonful of the slightly harder flan and lifted it to my lips. The perfect sweetness spread through my mouth.

“This is so good...” I murmured, getting a happy tail wag from Miss Micah, the one who had made the flan à la mode.

I took a bite-sized piece of apple as I watched the caramel sauce drip over the spot I'd eaten. It was crunchy, with a refreshing sweetness. *The apple is even tastier than I thought it would be!* The pancakes were fluffy and melted in my mouth with the cream.

Before I knew it, I had finished my treat off.

After drinking my tea and giving my stomach a little break, it was time to open the envelope from earlier.

"I'll open it up," I announced, doing so, and taking a paper that was folded in half out.

When I turned the paper around, just one side had writing and a picture on it. I guessed that was probably the front. On the upper part of it were the words "Travel Brochure," and on the bottom was a picture.

"What in the world is this?" I wondered, tilting my head.

Lord Glen froze the moment he saw it.

"That's...a vehicle called a bus," he told me, looking a bit lost for words.

"A...bus?"

Thinking about how I'd never seen such a strange vehicle before, I opened the paper up. On the left side were the start date and length of the Floral Crucible, along with an overview of the events within it. On the right side were things to bring and some important points.

"The Floral Crucible will begin in two months, and will last for a month," I said, reading off the left side.

"It'll take about four weeks to get to Celesark, so you'd have to leave in a month at the latest. If we've got that much time, we could go ahead of schedule and make a bit of leeway too..." Lord Glen mumbled, hand to his chin in thought.

"During my time there, I'll be living in the same place as the Grand Saintess candidates. It says that after taking part in various hands-on learning experiences and tea parties, I'll participate in the Floral Crucible myself."

This must have been what His Majesty meant by becoming friendly with the candidates.

"I'll need to bring clothing that's easy to move in and can be dirtied during hands-on learning, as well as dresses and accessories for the tea parties... Oh, two completely different types of clothing, huh?"

Hearing me, Gina and Martha perked up from their positions on standby near the wall. My personal maids were the ones who took care of my clothing, so they must've started thinking about what to bring.

"Since there'll be tea parties, it might be a good idea to bring food and fashionable things from Chronowize as gifts," I suggested. Even

though they weren't listed in the suggested items to bring, they seemed like they'd be necessary.

This time, it was Miss Micah's big triangular ears that stood straight up. She was probably reacting to the suggestion of food as my personal chef.

"Lastly, the important points section says that because the area where the Grand Saintess candidates are gathering is women's only, they'd like for me to only be accompanied by women."

"Huh? Women's...only...?!" Lord Glen cried out in shock, before his shoulders drooped in disappointment.

Up until now, Lord Glen had always come with me when visiting foreign countries. This came as a surprise to me too, since I thought he'd be coming this time as well. *But what should I say to him at a time like this?* I thought, panicking.

Suddenly, a knock rang out, and Lord Tris entered the room.

"Scuse me... Wait, why's His Highness looking so heartbroken?" he asked with a blank expression as he took a seat across the table.

I explained that I was going to be overseeing the Holy Country of Celesark's Floral Crucible, and that they said to only bring women.

"Pfft..." Lord Tris grunted, stifling his laughter. "You're sulking 'cause you can't go with her?"

"I am *not* sulking..."



“Either way, it isn’t Spirit Tree-related, so His Highness wouldn’t be able to go anyway,” Lord Tris said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He’s in charge of all the stuff around planting cuttings in different countries; that’s why he could go with you before. But this time is for you to oversee Celesark’s Floral Crucible...”

“...And that doesn’t have anything to do with the Spirit Trees,” I finished for him, getting a smile back.

“Exactly. So he wouldn’t be able to go anyway.”

“So he could have come if it was Spirit Tree-related...” I murmured, and Lord Glen’s head shot up.

“That’s it...! We actually got a response from Celesark about planting a cutting at the same time as the Floral Crucible request came through!” he said, pulling a letter out of nowhere...or rather, from his Item Box.

“So what’d they say?” Lord Tris asked.

Lord Glen smiled brightly. “They said they’d handle finding a big enough space, setting up someone to take care of it, and the security detail—so they’d absolutely love for us to plant a Spirit Tree cutting,” he announced as he spread the letter.

As soon as he did, the window to the lab opened, and Ele—Element, the King of Spirits—floated in, already in his humanoid Spirit form. His floor-length silver hair sparkled in the light.

“What an interesting topic you have,” he commented, floating over to us.

Then, he looked down at the letter Lord Glen had just spread out.

Eyes softening, he murmured, “Oho... So you’ve gained permission from the Holy Country of Celesark to plant a cutting?”

“Have you been there before?” I asked, getting a nod back.

“I knew it *before* it was a country. The one to found it was...the Proxy.”

“Huh?!” Lord Tris, Miss Micah, and I all cried out at once.

Lord Glen’s eyes widened as he stared at Ele. “You mean...that the first Grand Saintess was the Proxy?”

Ele nodded again, and his gaze grew distant, as if he was remembering the past.

“After she and I had brought prosperity to the world, the humanoid races began founding their own countries, but they had trouble... Seeing that, the Proxy founded the Holy Country of Celesark as an example for them. She was amazing...” he said, giving off a sense of somber happiness.

Ele must’ve loved the Proxy... No, judging from how he’s acting, he must still love her. But why did the Proxy burn down the first Spirit Tree of

Origin? Did she not know she'd have to be apart from Ele then? Or did she do it knowing that? Thinking about the Proxy just brought up more and more questions. Since we needed to talk about planting the Spirit Tree cutting, I pushed the topic to the back of my mind.

"When can you have a cutting ready?" Lord Glen asked Ele, who brought a hand to his chin and tilted his head slightly.

"If I begin preparations now...about two months."

"Two months?!" Lord Glen's shock echoed through the room.

"I'll be leaving in a month, and the Floral Crucible begins in two..." I said.

With a big smile, Lord Tris said, "He wouldn't make it, huh!"

Lord Glen's shoulders drooped in disappointment again.

The Floral Crucible will take a month to finish, and it takes that long to travel from our capital to the Holy Country's capital. That means... Thinking it through, I suggested, "Why don't we meet up in Celesark once I finish overseeing the Crucible?"

Lord Glen's head shot up again, and his eyes were glistening.

"If Ele and I bring the cutting branch while you're doing the Crucible, then..."

Watching us, Spirit-form Ele put a hand to his chin. "Hmm... A great idea. I would be uneasy having just guardian knights carry the box for the cutting, but there would be no problems if Glen was to carry it."

We would be separated for less time if we met back up after the Floral Crucible, but Lord Glen and I would still be apart for two months. *Though I might be lonely, I'll have to bear with it...*

"We'll have to decide who's going with you," Lord Glen said.

The next moment, Gina, Martha, and Miss Micah all came up to the table.

"Please, allow us to accompany you!"

"Dressing you, doing your hair—I'll do everything!"

"Bring Micah too~! I'll make sweets for your tea parties~!"

I nodded at the three's requests. "I'm glad you all want to go. It will be reassuring to have you all with me."

"So these three for sure. Other than them...you'll probably want more maids if you're staying for a whole month."

"Then why don't all of Lady Chelsea's personal maids accompany her?" Gina suggested, getting a nod back from Lord Glen.

"And for the guards, we'll discuss things with the Knight's Orders and have them dispatch female knights."

Lord Tris gave a wry smile at that. "Marx'll be pouting about how he can't go with her again."

"He does that every time."

I nodded along with their conversation. Brother Marx always had

horrible timing, and was never able to go along with me. The thought of him crying about it made me giggle.

+ + +

While we were gathering the things I'd been told to bring from the travel brochure and what we'd need for the trip to Celesark's capital, a month passed in a flash, and suddenly it was the day before our departure.

As I was doing the last minute luggage checks with my maids in my quarters in the Royal Research Institute's lodging house, Lord Glen appeared.

"Would it be okay if...I took up a moment of your time?"

"I was just thinking I'd like time to speak to you, Lord Glen," I said as my maids tactfully prepared tea for us and left the room. We sat down together on my three-seater sofa.

"This'll be the first time we'll be apart since you were recuperating in the Sargent Margraviate."

"Yes..."

We were separated for the half-year I spent recovering, and we'd exchanged letters all the while. On the day that he came to get me, he proposed and gave me the engagement ring on my right ring finger. The engagement ring was also a magic tool that would automatically cast defensive magic if its wearer was in danger, and had kept me safe numerous times.

I softly caressed the ring on my right hand.

"We've been together the entire time we've been engaged, so I'll be...lonely without you."

"I feel the same way," he replied, face approaching mine. Just as I was thinking about how angelically beautiful he looked, he pressed his forehead against my own. "I don't...want to let you go..."

Hearing him whisper like this made my heart squeeze painfully.



“I’ll be waiting for you in Celesark,” I told him, only for him to hug me painfully tightly. “And unlike when I was recuperating, I have my telepathy now!”

When I mentioned the telepathy power I’d gained by contracting with Root the Communication Spirit, he hugged me even tighter.

“L-Lord Glen... That... That hurts...” I squeezed out, and he finally loosened his grip.

That showed just how much he’d miss me. I wanted to let him know how I felt the same, maybe even worse. But it would probably be better to show rather than tell.

After catching my breath, I hugged him tight, as if I was getting back at him for his hug. *I’m usually too embarrassed to do anything like this, so it should show him how much I’ll miss him!*

...Or so I thought when I initiated the hug, but Lord Glen didn’t respond. *Did he not like it...?* I worried, before looking up at his face. He was bright red, all the way to his ears. *Is he...embarrassed?*

He seemed to come to a realization after a minute of me staring, and quickly turned away.

Whispering, he said, “I never expected you to be the one to hug me... So... Uh... I was so happy, I couldn’t even react...”

Lord Glen is so cute when he’s embarrassed! It was so fun seeing him like that that I hugged him again. This time though, he returned the hug back despite his bashfulness.

+ + +

The next day, the blue sky was completely devoid of any clouds—the perfect weather to depart with.

In the citadel’s carriage boarding area, Lord Glen, Lord Tris, Ele in his cat form, and my brother Marx had come to see me off. I looked out at them through the little carriage window.

“Why can’t I go along as Chelsea’s guard...” Brother Marx lamented, just as we’d thought he would.

Although, I didn’t think he’d pout about it even up to the day I left, I thought wryly.

“Marx, Miss Chelsea is laughing at you. Should an older brother be acting like that?” chided Lord Tris.

Brother Marx quickly jumped up before correcting his posture. “Uh... Um, yeah. Be careful not to injure yourself on your journey.”

I almost burst out laughing. *Even if you change your tune right before I leave, I know you spent the entire month crying about it!*

“Yes, I’ll be careful,” I said, trying to hold back a giggle.

“I’ll be waiting for my souvenir!” said Lord Tris with a smile.

«Enjoy yourself,» Ele said, sounding very self-important in his cat

form.

I smiled and nodded at both of them.

Ele had apparently never dealt with Celesark's Floral Crucible before, and said that despite not knowing the details, anything that the Proxy thought up had to be fun. Since it was called a crucible, I assumed it would be formal and difficult, but he said that was absolutely not the case. *Her Highness said that it was fun too... I hope it really is...*

Finally, I looked over to Lord Glen, who looked incredibly reluctant to part with me.

"I'll be waiting for you to get in touch..." he said.

My telepathy would allow me to communicate with anyone I'd touched while using it, no matter the distance. But since I was the one with the ability, Lord Glen couldn't initiate contact.

"I definitely will," I replied, getting a nod back from him. "I'm off!"

And so, I left on my journey to the Holy Country of Celesark.

2. The Holy Country of Celesark

During our half-month-long trip from the capital to the border between Chronowize and Celesark, each territory we stopped in along the way welcomed us warmly. When nobles traveled anywhere, they would be entertained at each stop, and in exchange for that hospitality, they'd spend lots of money shopping in the cities and towns of that territory in order to help it grow.

Now that I'd had my social debut and was an adult, it was necessary for me to be welcomed in the same way. Since I'd learned I was a lightweight with alcohol, I wanted to avoid anything that would have me drinking late into the night. But for some reason, every single territory I stopped in told me that it was okay to just join them for dinner, since I'd just come of age and wasn't used to things yet.

<Why have they all said the exact same thing?> I asked Lord Glen telepathically, only for him to tell me that he'd contacted them about it previously.

<I was worried about you getting drunk without me there with you, so...I stuck my nose in,> he reasoned.

I couldn't blame him for worrying about it, since I'd gotten so tipsy after drinking just a bit at my birthday party. But I was a bit disappointed in myself for making extra work for him.

<I've heard that you can raise your alcohol tolerance by drinking lots. I'll drink a ton and get better with it so I can do things properly!> I declared, but Lord Glen was quick to reproach.

<Getting drunk or not is based on your physical constitution! I mean, yeah, you *can* get used to it, but don't force it... Anyway, only drink when I'm there, okay?!>

He was frantically stopping me in a tone he never usually used, so I decided to do as he said and only drink with him for now.

+ + +

Once we crossed the border into Celesark, we met with the Winged woman who would be our guide.

"It's wonderful to meet you, Lady Observer and her party. My name is Nadeshiko Alerich, and I will be guiding you. I normally act as an aide to the current Grand Saintess. I look forward to working with you," Lady Nadeshiko introduced herself, thumping the right side of her chest with her left fist. As we looked at her blankly, she realized

that we had no idea what she'd just done, and explained, "This is how we greet each other in the Holy Country of Celesark."

Each country had a different greeting. In Chronowize, noblewomen curtsied. Ladies in the Radzuel Empire spun in place. The people of the Martec Republic raised both of their hands. It was interesting to see. I mimicked her motions once I understood, and she giggled.

The rest of the trip from the border to Celesark's capital took another half-month, but it felt as if it just flew by. It might've seemed that way because I didn't have to get a grand welcome from every place I stopped in like I had in Chronowize.

As we approached the holy capital's city limits, Lady Nadeshiko stopped our carriages and handed each of us a card-shaped magic tool.

"These cards are your passports. You'll need them to get inside of the capital, so please hang it around your neck or put it in your pockets to keep it safe."

I immediately put it around my neck.

Apparently, Celesark's capital had no walls. Instead, they utilized a barrier. No one could pass through the barrier without a passport—meaning you couldn't get into the capital without one. Those without one or who'd lost their passport would need to go to the customs office located outside of the capital and undertake various examinations to make sure they should be allowed through.

"What would happen if you attempted to enter the capital without a passport?" I asked.

Lady Nadeshiko smiled brightly. "You'd slam into the barrier wall and have a *very* bad time."

It seemed that it worked the same way as the barrier on the north side of Chronowize's citadel. There was an invisible wall there that was as hard as a rock.

I need to make sure I don't lose mine... I thought to myself, squeezing my passport tight as our carriages started moving again into the capital. We all managed to pass through the barrier safely, and I sighed in relief.

Glancing out of the carriage window, I could see very wide, straight roads.

"I'd heard about them, but the streets really are very straight, huh?" I commented, getting a nod back from Lady Nadeshiko.

It was said that the roads in the holy capital were made to stretch in a mesh pattern from all cardinal directions, by order of the first Grand Saintess who had founded the country. The main roads were all made wide enough that you could line up three carriages and still

have ample room to pass. Even the various thinner side roads were wide enough for more than two carriages. Since carriages hadn't even existed yet a few thousand years ago, they also said that the first Grand Saintess could see the future because of the road dimensions she had decreed.

Apparently, there are other buildings and roads built to the first Grand Saintess's specifications... Though I felt a bit conflicted in knowing that the first Grand Saintess was the Proxy, I really wanted to know what they looked like. I'd have to find some time to sightsee around the country.

While I was staring out the window in thought, my view changed from nothing but buildings to a forest.

"Is this...a forest?" I asked.

"This is the Flower Garden—the area in which the Grand Saintess candidates live," Lady Nadeshiko explained. "This natural area was created in order to separate them from the hustle and bustle, and ensure that they are able to undertake the Floral Crucible with a healthy body and mind."

I just nodded back at her as the carriage rode on. Occasionally, I could hear a bird chirping in the distance.

After a while, we reached a clear space with a few large manors. The carriage continued on before eventually stopping in front of one of them.

"You will be residing here in the Northern Manor until the Floral Crucible ends."

I stepped down out of the carriage, nodding at Lady Nadeshiko's words. The building was a bit smaller than the Sargent's villa in Chronowize's capital, but it was still breathtaking to see a manor that looked big enough to easily house more than twenty people.

"Though it may only be for a short time from today onward, we will be under your care," I told Lady Nadeshiko, and she smiled brightly back.

Once we'd finished having our luggage brought inside, my entire group gathered in the central hall on the second floor of the manor. Lady Nadeshiko was apparently going to tell us what we would be doing next.

"I thank you all so much for coming despite the distance," she started, making a fist with her left hand and thumping it on the right side of her chest.

When we mimicked her, she smiled happily for an instant before her expression once again became serious.

"Please allow me to reintroduce myself. I am Nadeshiko Alerich, and I will act as your party's guide. I am also the current Grand

Saintess's aide. I will swiftly deal with any issues you may have while living in the Northern Manor, so please don't be afraid to tell me anything."

We all nodded, and she continued.

"First, allow me to tell you about our location. The Flower Garden has five large manors within. The Eastern, Western, and Southern Manors house the Grand Saintess candidates, while the Northern Manor is where the Chronowize congregation will be housed. The Central Manor is where you will deepen your bonds with the candidates, so please do utilize it."

I could see the Central Manor through the window. It was so big that I couldn't see any of the others from where we were.

"Next, I will speak of our future plans. I know you all must be incredibly tired after finally arriving, so please take the day to rest. I will arrange an audience with Her Ladyship the Grand Saintess for tomorrow afternoon. I will contact you once its location is finalized."

From what I'd heard from Her Highness, the current Grand Saintess was a very lively and interesting lady.

"The day after tomorrow, you will meet the Grand Saintess candidates. I will discuss our further plans during that meeting." After giving us a rundown of our future plans, Lady Nadeshiko asked, "Does anyone have any questions?"

"Will we be allowed to leave the Flower Garden in our spare time?" I asked, thinking back to the cityscape with its straight, wide roads that were much different than Chronowize's.

She shook her head. "You will be unable to leave the Flower Garden until the Floral Crucible is finished. The first Grand Saintess decreed that by cutting yourselves off from the outside and distancing yourself from ordinary life, you will be purified."

I never expected that we wouldn't be able to leave until the Floral Crucible was finished. Though I was incredibly disappointed, the first Grand Saintess must have had a good reason for not letting anyone out, since she could see the future.

While I sat there a bit dejectedly, Miss Micah raised her hand.

"What'll we do for shopping~?" she asked in a worried tone, ears down to the sides.

"We will prepare anything you deem necessary."

"I've got lots, so I'll write it all down and give it to you~!"

"Understood."

Nodding, Miss Micah seemed to accept that answer.

Lastly, we began sorting out our rooming situation. It was decided that I would use the largest room on the second floor on the southeast side, while the maids would stay two to a room on the north and east sides across the hall. Miss Micah would have the room opposite the

master suite, which was closest to the dining hall on the southwest side, while the guardian knights who came along with us would occupy the first floor. For security, Chronowize's female knights and Celesark's female guards would team up and work in shifts.

"There really are only women here..." I murmured.

Lady Nadeshiko nodded. "The Flower Garden is protected by a barrier that men are unable to pass through."

They went that far to keep it ladies only?! I was shocked.

+ + +

That night, I used my telepathy to contact Lord Glen after I snuggled into bed.

< Good evening, Lord Glen. Can you hear me? > I asked, always nervous when I started the conversation.

< Good evening, Chelsea. I can hear you. > His voice rang out sweeter in my head than when we were together, sounding as if he was whispering in my ear. It made me feel like I was floating on air. < You said you'd be getting to the capital around now. Are you already there? >

< Yes. We'll be staying in an area on the capital's east side known as the Flower Garden. I was shocked to find out that the roads here truly are wide and laid out in a mesh pattern. >

< Laid out in a mesh pattern... I'm looking forward to seeing that. >

It was fun imagining how surprised he would be when he saw this same view in a month.

< The Flower Garden is surrounded by a forest, and there are a few manors inside of it. I'm in the Northern— >

< Chelsea? > Lord Glen suddenly said my name, interrupting me. < I lost you partway through that sentence. Is something wrong? >

< Huh? >

< Ah, I can hear you again. >

Up until now, there had never been even a single instance of my telepathy being interrupted. Wondering, I asked, < How much did you hear? >

< I heard you say that the Flower Garden was surrounded by a forest, but the rest didn't register as sound, > he explained.

< Then I'll just have to say it again. There are a few manors within the Flower Garden... >

< I really can't hear the whole thing. >

< Huh?! > I couldn't understand what was happening.

I tilted my head in confusion as his voice rang out in my mind again.

< Were you trying to talk about something inside the Flower

Garden? >

< Yes, I was. >

< That's probably why. Everything related to the Floral Crucible is top-secret information in Celesark, so they've probably got some constraints built into a barrier to make sure you can't tell anyone outside about it. >

< Constraints? > I asked, not being very familiar with the word.

< We've got something similar in Chronowize. There's a barrier on the northern side of the citadel that only people with permission can pass through, remember? >

< Yes. I heard that it surrounded the royal living quarters. >

< That barrier has constraints built in to make sure that no one inside can tell anyone outside about the layout. You can talk all about it if you're both inside though. >

I hadn't known anything about that. It seems my surprise leaked over, because Lord Glen chuckled.

< I didn't know that constraints could affect telepathy too. But anyway, I'm glad you got there safe, > he said, sounding relieved.

< After this, there'll be... Um... Lots of things. > I wanted to tell him all about how I was going to have an audience with the current Grand Saintess, and meet with the candidates, but I was sure he wouldn't be able to hear a word.

I heard him laughing at my attempt to be vague.

< It's aggravating, not being able to tell you what I want to tell you, > I grumbled, pouting. His laughter only got louder.

Once he was finished laughing for the moment, he murmured, < Lots of things, huh... Meeting with the Grand Saintess candidates is probably one of them. >

< Yes, it is... How did you know? >

< I figured you'd have to meet with them. Your main job as an observer is to get on friendly terms with them, after all. >

His reasoning made sense.

< On our side, we'll be leaving tomorrow, > he explained.

< Then I should let you get to bed as soon as possible. >

< You'll probably be busy from tomorrow on, so let's each go to bed for tonight. >

< All right. Good night. >

< Good night. >

Though I was reluctant to do so, I cut off our telepathic link. But I just wanted to see him more and more each day during the month we'd spent apart. *But I have my telepathy*, I told myself, shutting my eyes.

The next day, we all met in the dining hall to eat together. In Celesark, it was apparently best to eat with lots of people. Those of us from Chronowize were trying to follow their customs, so we'd be eating together as much as possible.

Once we were finished with breakfast, I helped unpack. Although when I say "unpack," I really just meant "have the things I'd stored in my personal Spirit World storage room returned to me." Dresses, accessories, daywear, underwear, shoes—I asked for them all back, one by one, and lined them up on my bed. Then, my maids carried them off into the walk-in closet.

Once I'd retrieved everything I'd stored, Root the Communication Spirit popped out of my Spirit Tree bracelet. Looking like a ten-ish-year-old human boy about the size of my thumb, with butterfly-like wings, he flew around the room.

«Everyone said you should have everything you need,» he reported.

"Thank you for telling me," I said, grateful, and he fluttered his wings and landed on top of my head.

Hm? I thought only women could get through the Flower Garden's barrier? Is Root not a boy?

"Root, you're a boy, right?"

«Yep!» he replied happily, seemingly glad I spoke to him.

"There's a barrier here that only lets females in..." I explained.

Root moved from atop my head to in front of my eyes, then flapped his wings and crossed his arms.

«I came through the bracelet... I didn't go through any barriers!»

Now that he mentioned it, that was true. *Can males get inside the Flower Garden if they don't pass through the barrier, or is it because Root is a Spirit?* I thought about it for a few minutes, but I wasn't sure. I'd have to ask someone about it sometime.



After lunch, it was afternoon. I was changed into a gown for my audience with the Grand Saintess. I was outfitted with accessories like earrings and a necklace, and had my hair done. Just as a light layer of makeup was applied and I was ready to go, a knock rang out.

“Come in,” I said, only for a very flustered Lady Nadeshiko to enter.

“I am so incredibly sorry. About your audience with the Grand Saintess...”

“Can I go in yet?”

Before Lady Nadeshiko could finish, a woman I’d never seen before poked her head into the room. Her light sky-blue hair cascaded down as she crinkled her golden eyes with mirth.

“Please, wait—” Lady Nadeshiko cried, but the woman ignored her, entering the room.

“A pleasure to meet you. I am the current Grand Saintess, Freesia Grumbach. I’ve come for our observer!” the woman who introduced herself as the Grand Saintess said, smiling happily as she walked up to me and thumped her left fist against the right side of her chest.

+ + +

Moving to the Northern Manor’s hall, instead of an audience with the Grand Saintess, I had tea. Lady Nadeshiko had left, needing to contact the people at the location where our audience was planned.

“I’m sorry for barging in so suddenly. I did it because I didn’t want to do something as stuffy as a proper audience,” the Grand Saintess said apologetically.

“Oh, please don’t apologize!” I couldn’t have someone of the same rank as Chronowize’s king apologizing to me! When I cried out, she immediately lifted her head, expression still guilty.

“Now... Where should I start?”

Biting into a cookie set on the low table and taking a sip of her tea, the Grand Saintess rested an index finger on her chin as she pondered. Wearing a vestment with white fabric and golden embroidery, coupled with her light sky-blue hair, she looked quite mystical. Aside from her adorable behavior, that is.

“I think...I should probably start with what the Grand Saintess position is.”

She first explained how the following information is top-secret, how it can only be discussed within the Flower Garden itself, and that I wouldn’t be able to say anything about it outside. After that, she moved on to her main topic.

“The job of Celesark’s Grand Saintess is to maintain the defensive devices that Her Lady the First Grand Saintess created, such as the

barriers and shrines. These defensive devices are scattered throughout the country... I spend most of the year making sure those devices are working and restarting them,” she said with a sigh. “Maintaining them is super hard though. After all, the only person who can touch them is the person with the Grand Saintess’s seal, so I can’t pawn the job off on anyone else... When I’m not doing that, I have to participate in memorial ceremonies around the country. I basically have no days off.”

The Grand Saintess then proceeded to vent all of her complaints on me. She couldn’t go on a single trip in the ten years she’d been Grand Saintess, and whenever she heard anything about the defensive systems acting up, she’d have to cut off her rare holidays to go check on them. *The more I hear, the worse it sounds!*

“I thought to myself *so many times* that it would be amazing if there was another Grand Saintess aside from me...” she said, gulping the rest of her tea down. “I’ll stop complaining here. Now, I’d like to hear about you, Lady Chelsea.”

“About me?”

“Yes! What is Chronowize like? I’ve never gone abroad before, so I’m super curious.”

“Chronowize is ruled by a human king...” I began.

I went on to explain what I knew about my home country. How the royal capital was surrounded by walls, how the roads weren’t laid out in a mesh pattern like Celesark, about where my favorite general store was in the plaza by the main road, what cakes and sweets were currently popular—everything.

The Grand Saintess hung on to every word I said, eyes sparkling.

“Once I retire, I want to go to other countries and sightsee!” she exclaimed.

The Grand Saintess was quite adorable.

+ + +

The day after I had tea with the Grand Saintess, I was to meet with the Grand Saintess candidates in the Central Manor’s hall. Wearing a light purple dress I was given by Lord Glen, I sat down on the sofa I was led to.

“Now that everyone is here, I’ll start with the introductions,” said Lady Nadeshiko, getting nods from the three ladies who sat on sofas across and to the side of me. “This is Lady Chelsea, who has traveled from the Kingdom of Chronowize in order to oversee the Floral Crucible. She is residing in the Northern Manor.”

I stood and did a curtsy before sitting back down. Apparently, it was necessary for me to give a Chronowize-style greeting to show that I was foreign.

“Next, we have Lady Amaryllis in the Eastern Manor, Lady Nemophila in the Western Manor, and finally, Lady Mimosa in the Southern Manor,” Lady Nadeshiko continued, introducing the three Grand Saintess candidates and which manor they were residing in. Each of them made a fist with their left hand and thumped it on the right side of their chest. “From today forward, we will have all of you become closer to each other in preparation for the Floral Crucible.”

I tilted my head in confusion. “About that... What does the Floral Crucible entail?” I asked.

Back in Chronowize, I hadn’t been told much about it, since it was top-secret for the Holy Country of Celesark.

Lady Nadeshiko looked at me and blinked, surprised. “Did Her Ladyship the Grand Saintess not explain things to you?”

“She told me all about what the Grand Saintess’s job was, but other than that...”

Slapping her right hand to her forehead, Lady Nadeshiko heaved a great sigh.

“I’ll have to lecture her about that later... Allow me to explain it now,” she said, straightening up as I nodded back. “The Floral Crucible is what we call going through the Shrine of Trials within the Flower Garden to reach the Room of Selection in its deepest parts, then calling the First Grand Saintess’s name in front of the Grand Mirror.”

“Um, what happens if no one reaches the Room of Selection?” I asked.

“There has not been a single instance of candidates failing to reach the Room of Selection in all of the years since our country was founded. I cannot go into detail due to constraints, but...the Shrine of Trials is built so that you will absolutely get there, so worry not.”

Since the shrine had “trials” in the name, I’d thought that there was a chance they would fail, but apparently, I was wrong.

After I nodded, Lady Nadeshiko continued. “Once you’ve said the First Grand Saintess’s name in front of the Grand Mirror, the three candidates and the observer will suggest who is most suited to become the Grand Saintess.”

“So it isn’t decided by who arrives first or says Her name first... But instead, who performed best in whatever test the room might give?” I asked about other possible methods, surprised I would be taking part in the suggestion process.

She shook her head. “The order in which you enter the room does not matter. It also doesn’t matter who is the one who says Her Ladyship’s name. And about any tests within the room...you realize that you, as the observer, will be grading and choosing the best candidate as per your evaluation, yes?”

I was at a loss about how to answer her.

“And as for any tests, those were all finished before the Floral Crucible began. Regarding their standard knowledge, mana pool size, manners, physical and magical skills—these three candidates were all tested and chosen from more than a hundred applicants. All three are outstanding, and would have no problem if they were chosen as the Grand Saintess,” Lady Nadeshiko said.

The three ladies gave happy nods.

“As for the two who will not become the next Grand Saintess, they will be able to become aides like me. Both the Grand Saintess and Her aides work for not only the sake of the country, but their families, so suggest who you feel is the right fit.”

Lady Nadeshiko is Her Ladyship's aide, right? So she was a former candidate?! So the reason she can lecture Her is because they've been close since their days as candidates...

“It will take three days for you to travel to the Shrine of Trials, choose the next Grand Saintess, and return. Inside the shrine, artificial golems and slimes run rampant, so for the time being, you will learn how to deal with them and how to camp out.”

Does that mean the hands-on learning is about what to do against artificial golems and slimes, and learning how to camp?!

It seemed that all three of the Grand Saintess candidates had already heard all of this, so they were just nodding along calmly. Now that I thought back, I did remember that other than saying it was fun, Her Highness had also mentioned that I'd never experience something like it again. She was right about that...

“Now, we have one request for you, Lady Chelsea,” Lady Nadeshiko said, eyebrows sagging apologetically as she corrected her posture. “We ask this of all our observers, but...inside the Shrine of Trials, would you be able to avoid using your Skill?”

“Why?” I asked, confused.

“The Floral Crucible is meant to test the Grand Saintess candidates, so we ask for our observer to simply *observe*,” she explained.

I'd come here to play that role, so I had expected that much.

When I looked at her blankly, she whispered, “We actually have records that speak of one observer who didn't approve of the candidate's actions and meddled both verbally and physically, and ended up flooding the shrine using her [Water Magic] Skill...”

Flooding... Just cleaning up an overturned bucket is hard enough! I thought, momentarily flashing back to my days at the barony.

“I understand,” I said, nodding.

Lady Nadeshiko looked relieved. “But you needn't hold back in the case of any unforeseen circumstances... Say, if you were injured.

Please use your Skill all you like, then.”

“Would it also be all right to use it if one of the Grand Saintess candidates is injured?” I asked, and got a smile back.

“Yes, of course. You’re quite kind, Lady Chelsea.”

I was relieved to know that I wouldn’t be completely powerless if someone was injured in front of my eyes.

Interlude 1: Glen

Meanwhile, in the royal capital of Chronowize, Glen and company were preparing to depart for Celesark.

“It’s finally time to go, huh!” Tris commented gleefully to Glen, who was stepping into the carriage.

“I never thought you’d end up coming along,” Glen replied, looking back at Tris, who smiled again.

“Apparently, there’s a rule that you’ve gotta have one of the Royal Research Institute’s researchers tag along when you’re planting a cutting so they can write a report about it! I had no idea until the chief told me.”

Back when they’d headed to Radzuel to plant a cutting of the Spirit Tree, Glen had made up that rule in order to have an excuse for Chelsea to come with him. Because of that, someone needed to come with him on the trip to Celesark, and that ended up being Tris, as he was the second-most familiar with the Spirit Tree among the researchers, Chelsea being the first.

“I’ve always wanted to tag along with you two, so I’m super happy they picked me!”

While Tris chattered, absolutely thrilled, Marx stood behind him, head hung low.

“Why do I always get left behind?!” he grumbled.

«That man always cries, doesn’t he...» muttered cat-form Ele exasperatedly. Ele was sitting atop the wooden cutting box, which had already been loaded onto the carriage. Glen snorted a laugh in response.

After looking between Glen and Ele, Tris nodded in understanding. “Marx always has the worst timing. He already had plans to go on the yearly monster hunt later today.”

«Nothing he could do then.»

“Nope. He always cries after it because he just can’t give it up.”

Tris shouldn’t have been able to understand Ele when he was in his cat form, but for whatever reason, they still managed to have a full conversation. This amused Glen, who *could* understand Ele—so much so that he had to frantically hold back his laughter.

With everyone loaded into the carriage, and Glen calmed down, it was nearly time to leave.

“Getting back to business... You haven’t forgotten anything, have

you?” Glen asked, doing his final checks.

“I’ve got someone watering the fields for me, so I’m all good,” Tris replied, getting a nod back.

«As long as I have the cutting of the Spirit Tree, I need nothing else,» Ele said, tapping the wooden box containing the cutting with a little paw.

“Yup. All you need’s the branch, huh!”

“So you *understand* him, right?” accused Glen suspiciously, but all he got back from the researcher was a blank stare.

“Nope. All I hear is meows. But I kinda get what he means, since we talk when he’s in Spirit form,” Tris replied, smiling.

3. A Tea Party with the Grand Saintess Candidates

After our initial introductions, we ended up moving to the greenhouse to the south of the Central Manor for a tea party. It had apparently been planned, because everything was ready when we arrived.

Just as it had been during our meeting, Lady Amaryllis sat in the east, Lady Nemophila in the west, Lady Mimosa to the south, and I to the north.

“We thought we could both expound more about ourselves and hear all about you in this manner,” said Lady Amaryllis with a smile once we’d all sat down. The other two ladies nodded as well; Lady Nemophila with a calm smile and Lady Mimosa with a friendly one.

Lady Amaryllis stood first. She was wearing a bright red dress that complimented her amazing figure, and had shiny black hair hanging down to her waist.

“I’ll introduce myself first... I am Amaryllis Bloom. Normally, I act as Her Ladyship the Grand Saintess’s guard. Though I am best with the sword, I am also quite proficient in fighting with a bow, staff, and magic.”

Next, Lady Nemophila stood. She wore a refreshing blue dress, and her smooth silver hair was gathered in a high ponytail. She also seemed to be the tallest of the three.

“I’m next. Nemophila Ostbalt here, and I study magic at the Research Institute. I also act as the Grand Saintess’s guard when needed, and can use both a sword and a staff. My specialty is attack magic.”

Lady Mimosa was the third to go. She looked adorable, wearing an airy yellow dress, paired with her shoulder-length green hair.

“I’m last, huh? I’m Mimosa Nordheim. I normally work in customer relations at the Peony Company, which my father runs. I can fight with both weapons and magic, but since my Skill is defensive magic, I’m at my best when using a great shield.”

“I see that you all have both skill with weapons and magic, and have flowers for names,” I commented, only for them to look at me blankly.

“Every woman in Celesark is named after a flower,” Lady Amaryllis clarified as the other two women nodded.

Now that she'd mentioned it, I realized that both Lady Nadeshiko and the current Grand Saintess Lady Freesia had floral names as well.

"Because the examinations for choosing Grand Saintess candidates require weapon skill and magic, most of the ladies specialized in them."

"Plus, this Floral Crucible has us heading into a shrine full of golems and slimes," Lady Nemophila followed up. "We need to be able to do damage with something."

"We also have to be able to protect the observer," Lady Mimosa added.

In Chronowize, most women didn't bother learning anything about fighting, unless their Skills were physical or magical. I was surprised at how different things could be in foreign countries.

"Now, please, tell us about yourself, Lady Chelsea!" The three Grand Saintess candidates all looked at me—Lady Amaryllis smiling, Lady Nemophila seeming a bit nervous, and Lady Mimosa clasping her hands together, eyes sparkling.

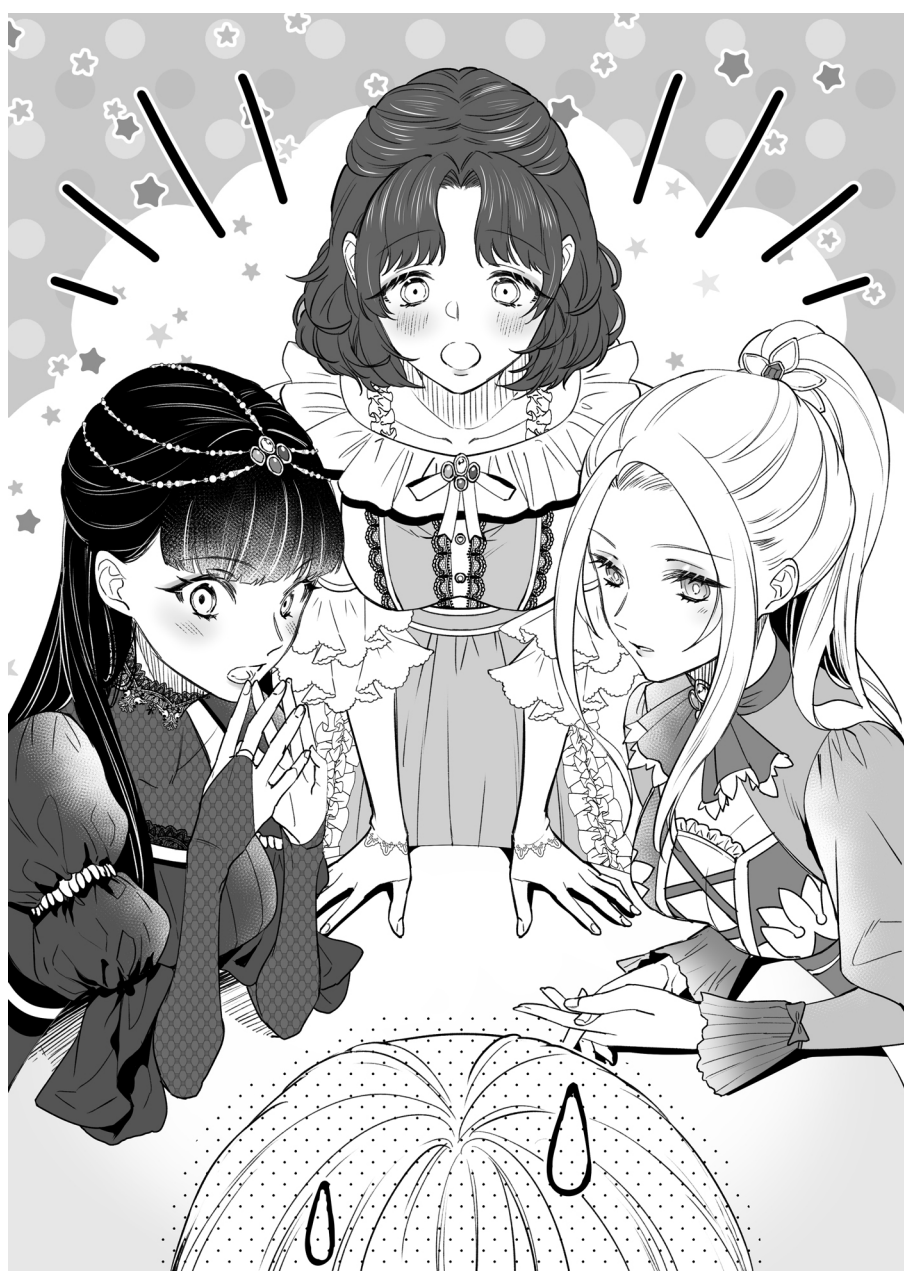
I straightened up my posture.

"My name is Chelsea Sargent, and I come from the Kingdom of Chronowize," I began. "I'm the daughter of Margrave Sargent, and I recently turned fifteen. I normally work in Chronowize's Royal Research Institute as a research fellow. I am also engaged to the king of Chronowize's younger brother, Prince Glenarnold."

"Fifteen?!"

"A research fellow, huh?"

"You're *engaged*?!"



When they all saw how surprised I was by their reactions, Lady Amaryllis spoke. “Let us ask our questions one by one.”

The other two women nodded. They might have all had different airs about them and different tones, but they also seemed to work very well together.

“I’ll start,” Lady Amaryllis said. “So, you are only fifteen, yes? Here in the Holy Country of Celesark, we normally live with our parents and attend schooling until we are around twenty-five years of age—hence our collective shock. To think you are visiting foreign countries on your own at fifteen, and even staying in them for lengths of time.”

“In Chronowize, we come of age at fifteen years old. Then, we usually graduate from schooling before age sixteen to begin our work as apprentices,” I explained while thinking about how different things were between our countries.

Lady Nemophila tilted her head at my response. “In that case, shouldn’t you still be in school?”

“Um...because I awakened to a new type of Skill, I didn’t go to school. I’ve been learning as I work and research.”

Normally, noble children in Chronowize began their basic education at home around the age of five. Not only were they educated by their parents, attendants, and hired tutors, but they were also taught dancing, manners, swordsmanship, embroidery...all kinds of things. When they awoke to their Skills on their twelfth birthday, their family would call for a nationally recognized Appraiser to appraise them.

Those who had a useful Skill that required special training were then brought to the Royal Research Institute, for about a year. From thirteen on, they would enter the Royal Academy to test their basic knowledge, and make social connections. At fifteen, the children then entered higher education upon their own merits. Higher education could be at the Academy, in magic or knight schools, or other specialist institutions. After their eventual graduation from higher education, before they turned sixteen, they then began their work as apprentices.

For common children, they started elementary education at around seven, while helping around at home. Then, all the children who turned twelve each year were appraised as a group by an Appraiser sent by the country... After that, they’d start working as apprentices no matter what their Skill was.

In my case, I had been abused while living at the barony where I was born, so I hadn’t had any proper basic education until after my twelfth birthday. It’d been obvious that I never would have been able

to keep up with classes at the Royal Academy. Plus, since I'd awakened to a brand-new type of Skill, we wanted to prioritize researching and studying it. Considering those two facts, it was decided that I would be taught my basic education while studying my Skill and working as a research fellow at the Royal Research Institute. Essentially, I bypassed attending either the Royal Academy or any other higher education.

When I politely told them the reasoning, all three looked shocked.

"Next is my question," Lady Nemophila said, bringing a hand to her chin. "I've heard that research fellows in Chronowize's Royal Research Institute are treated similarly to the royal family... How in the world did you become one at fifteen?"

I explained how I'd used my Skill to save the life of the granddaughter of Duke Bazrack—who was the former king's younger brother.

"You must have an amazing Skill," Lady Mimosa said.

"My Skill is [Seed Creation], and it allows me to create any seed that I wish for."

"Any seed?" repeated Lady Amaryllis.

I nodded, deciding to actually show them how it worked. "I'll make a Cookie Seed—[Seed Creation]!"

With a light pop, a seed shaped like a lightly baked cookie appeared in the palm of my hand. The three Grand Saintess candidates all stared at it.

"If I plant this in the ground, it will grow fruits filled with cookies."

"I'd like to see it planted," said Lady Nemophila.

At her request, we got permission from one of the Central Manor's maids to plant it in a corner of the greenhouse. Then, we all stood and headed to the spot, along with all of the female guards with us.

"I'll plant it now," I said, pressing the seed into the soil.

The seed sprouted and grew to my height in an instant, flowering and growing a light-brown melon-shaped fruit bigger than would fit in my two palms. When I harvested it, the stem and leaves withered and decomposed into fertilizer. Then, I split the cookie-filled fruit in half in front of everyone. Inside were ten delicious-smelling, freshly baked cookies.

"Just like this."

I looked around. Everyone but the female guard knight I'd brought with me from Chronowize stood wide-eyed in shock. The female knight had been assigned to me back when I first became a research fellow, so she knew all about my Skill and just nodded along, expressionless.

"A-Amazing!" The first one to speak was Lady Mimosa, who

seemed incredibly excited.

“What do they taste like?” Lady Nemophila wondered, looking at the cookies inside the fruit with great interest.

Lady Amaryllis was just frozen in shock.

“Would you like to taste test them once we sit back down?”

Everyone nodded at my offer, and we headed back to our table.

“We shall taste them first,” said the Grand Saintess candidates’ guards, each taking a cookie to test for poison. My female guard knight also took one, happily munching it down. Since the flavor was the same as Miss Micah’s cookies, they had to be delicious.

Once the guards had proven they were safe, the three candidates were allowed to try them. Lady Amaryllis gingerly took one, squeezing her eyes shut as she took a bite from the corner. Lady Nemophila checked the smell and form of the cookie before popping it into her mouth. Lady Mimosa didn’t even wait between picking hers up and putting it into her mouth.

“Delicious...”

“Huh. It really is a cookie.”

“It’s amazing how you can eat something this good whenever you want!”

I was relieved to hear their opinions. My Skill could save lives, but it also had neat little uses like this. If at all possible, I wanted them to think of my Skill as something for fun.

Eventually, we went through all the cookies from the seed.

“Last up is my question,” announced Lady Mimosa, her eyes sparkling. “I’ve heard that engagements in Chronowize are mostly political, without considering love. What is your fiancé like?” she asked, looking at me worriedly.

My engagement with Lord Glen wasn’t political. Since I absolutely wanted to get that across, I bashfully decided to tell them how I felt about him.

“My fiancé Lord Glen has dark blue hair like the night, and aqua eyes that suck you in, along with an angelic smile. He always worries for me, and is gentle and warm... Whenever I’m in trouble, he’ll immediately come running to save me... He’s much more amazing than I deserve.”

The more I said, the hotter my face became. It had been a month since we’d last seen each other. I spoke to him via my telepathy, but did so every few days out of worry that I’d bother him doing it every night. Whenever we spoke, it made me want to see him even more. *I miss him...*

“You must really love your fiancé...” Lady Mimosa said, causing me to hide my face behind my hands as my embarrassment peaked.

“It seems to be an engagement out of love,” murmured Lady

Amaryllis.

“Would it not be possible that it’s one-sided on Lady Chelsea’s end?” argued Lady Nemophila.

“Then all we need to do is have her tell us everything that’s happened between their meeting and now!” Lady Mimosa suggested, and Lady Amaryllis readily agreed.

After that, I ended up recounting everything that had gone on between Lord Glen and I since we’d first met. They made me go into great detail when explaining how he came to the Sargent Margraviate to propose to me.

“It is absolutely an engagement made out of love... Here in Celesark, we would refer to you as lovers!” said Lady Amaryllis, her cheeks faintly red.

“If you’re lovers...how far have you gone?” Lady Nemophila asked, looking as if she’d suddenly thought of it.

“How...far...?” I asked, not understanding the question.

Lady Amaryllis put her palms to her cheeks and said, “From what you have told, you have held hands. You have also hugged and been carried by him.”

“What about kissing?” Lady Mimosa asked.

My cheeks went red again. “Um... Er...”

“It seems you have yet to kiss one another,” Lady Amaryllis concluded.

“No... He has k-kissed my forehead before...”

“Parents kiss their children’s foreheads all the time. Lovers kiss on the lips, don’t they?” argued Lady Nemophila.

“Huh?”

“Thus you have not truly kissed.”

Forehead kisses are for family, while kisses on the lips are for lovers? Lord Glen had never kissed me on the lips before. *Does that mean that my feelings for him aren’t reciprocated?* I was getting more worried by the minute.

“How can they be lovers if they have yet to kiss on the lips...?” wondered Lady Amaryllis.

“His Highness might not have the guts to do it,” said Lady Nemophila.

“Couldn’t he just be holding off since she’s so young?” suggested Lady Mimosa.

“That is a possibility. Lady Chelsea is only fifteen, after all...”

“Oh yeah, you’re right. She did say that they come of age at fifteen back in Chronowize.”

“Maybe he was waiting for her to turn fifteen!”

I was so caught up in my worry that I didn’t hear the three of them discussing it at all.

Once I came back to my senses, I was in bed in the Northern Manor.

Huh? When did I get back here? As I rushed to sit up, I saw Miss Micah sitting in a chair beside the bed.

“Chelsea’s awake~!” she called out for Martha and Gina, who then approached.

“Lady Chelsea, how are you feeling?” Martha asked, checking me over.

“I’m fine...” I answered, only for Gina’s face to warp in worry.

“When you returned from the Central Manor, you seemed incredibly tired, and went to sleep without even eating dinner.”

Now I remember... When the tea party with the three Grand Saintess candidates was over, I hobbled back to the Northern Manor and just crawled into bed. My feelings for Lord Glen might have been one-sided, with him feeling nothing in return. Even though I wanted to think otherwise, the fact that he’d never kissed me on the lips made me spiral anxiously.

“Though I realize it was not our place, we’ve heard about what you and the Grand Saintess candidates were chatting about from your guard knight,” Gina said, before smiling brightly. “We’ll need to punish His Highness for worrying you so.”

“Huh?”

While I sat shocked, Martha nodded along. “You haven’t done anything wrong at all, Lady Chelsea. You needn’t be worried.”

But even with them saying that, my anxiety remained. As my shoulders drooped again, Miss Micah pointed to the ring on my right ring finger.

“What is this~?”

The ring was a magical tool that would automatically cast defensive magic if the wearer was in danger, and had a magic stone the same aqua color as Lord Glen’s eyes.

“My...engagement ring,” I answered timidly.

“That ring is a national treasure, and one you can’t easily remove, at that~! The fact that he gave you something so hard to get rid of just screams out how possessive he is~!”

“Possessive...?”

“I mean that he loves you, and has absolutely no intention of letting you go~!”

The more Miss Micah spoke, the hotter my cheeks grew. To think that I’d doubted Lord Glen’s feelings just because he hadn’t kissed me on the lips, even though he’d given me a ring that meant that much... *I’m horrible!*

“You’ve just gotta get ready for it, Chelsea~!”
I nodded, feeling quite regretful.

4. Hands-On Learning

The next day, I put on a simple dress that I could get dirty and headed to the Central Manor's courtyard. Though the courtyard was surrounded by the building in a way that kept it out of view from the outside, it was still large enough to hold a garden party in. But the area was empty, with not a single shrub or flower in sight. It reminded me of a training ground. And in the center of the training grounds-like courtyard stood the three Grand Saintess candidates.

Lady Amaryllis wore a red top that looked similar to the knight's clothing that my brother Marx wore, along with pants and boots. Lady Nemophila wore a blue robe similar to what Lord Tris wore, also along with pants and boots. Lady Mimosa wore a yellow shirt with leather armor, short pants that ended above her knees, and long boots that covered them. It seemed that all of them wore their attire frequently, because though they didn't look frayed, they also certainly weren't brand new.

"From today forward, we will include Lady Chelsea in our battle training," announced Lady Nadeshiko in the Central Manor's courtyard, straightening her posture as she spoke. All of the maids and guards wore their usual clothing. "As I explained yesterday, the Shrine of Trials is filled with man-made golems and slimes. The Grand Saintess candidates will need to head for the Room of Selection in the very depths while dealing with them and protecting Lady Chelsea at the same time. Lady Chelsea will need to move along with you and learn how you will be protecting her."

Since I had no way to fight, my objective was to stay out of their way.

As we nodded at Lady Nadeshiko's words, one of the maids used her [Earth Magic] Skill to create a tall golem that stood about two heads higher than an adult man. It was probably created to look similar to the man-made golems. Next, another maid set down a flat, seaweed-like green plush that was around the size of my arms, held in a circle on the ground.

What's that?

"This is a plush slime," explained the maid, seemingly noticing my inquisitive gaze.

"Though the man-made golems in the Shrine range from small to large in several different types, the ones you will encounter most are

of this size,” explained Lady Nadeshiko as she pointed at the earthen golem. “Now, I will have you three show Lady Chelsea how you fight.”

All three Grand Saintess candidates nodded, looking serious before moving in front of the earthen golem. Then, without a signal, they each began attacking.

As the golem swung down its fist, Lady Mimosa blocked it with her great shield. Then, Lady Amaryllis attacked from the right with her sword, and when the earthen golem lost its balance, Lady Nemophila hit it from the left with her magic. Just as the golem continued fighting with its opposite fist, Lady Amaryllis thrust her sword into the golem’s elbow joint, stopping its movement. Then, with another magical attack from Lady Nemophila, the golem fell, returning to the earth it was made of.

“Amazing...” I marveled, getting a happy smile back from Lady Amaryllis.

After that, I joined the battle against the golem. I did nothing but stand off to the side to stay out of their way. Though I was doing as was expected of me, my Sargent blood was boiling with the desire to fight as well, and I struggled to hold myself back.

Once we reached break time, the Grand Saintess candidate trio and I sat right down on the ground where we were.

“You show much promise, Lady Chelsea,” Lady Nemophila murmured, complimenting me. I tilted my head, not understanding what she meant.

“Since you know where to move to stay out of our way during battle, it makes it much easier for us to fight,” Lady Mimosa explained, smiling gently.

Since I had so much experience being attacked by monsters and other humans, I always moved around while taking the position of things and people into account when I was being protected by Lord Glen or my guard knights. Due to how limited I was with helping, I at least wanted to stay out of everyone’s way. Still...

“It would be nice if I could fight as well...” I murmured my true feelings with a bitter smile.

The Grand Saintess candidate trio all blinked at me.

“You want to fight as well, Lady Chelsea?! How wonderful!” Lady Amaryllis openly praised me. I hadn’t meant to say anything amazing, so I had no idea how to respond.

“Then why don’t you learn how to fight in at least one way while you’re here?” Lady Mimosa suggested, smirking like a small child who was about to play a prank.

That might be a good idea... Back in Chronowize, I had to prioritize acting like a proper lady, so I never had the chance to say I wanted to

learn how to fight. *But here I do have that chance!*

"Yes, please!" I cried, clasping my hands together as if in prayer. In response, I got a happy smile from Lady Amaryllis, a small smirk from Lady Nemophila, and a friendly grin from Lady Mimosa as they all nodded at me.

"Break time will be ending soon, but... What are you all chatting about over here?" asked Lady Nadeshiko as she approached us.

If I was going to make any time to learn how to fight, I would probably need Lady Nadeshiko's permission. Thinking that, I repeated what we'd been talking about during our break. Hearing me out, she gave me a wonderful smile.

"Would that be all right?" I asked for confirmation, and Lady Nadeshiko nodded.

"Absolutely. Since you already know how someone being protected should move, we can change your combat drills into time for you to learn how to fight."

And so, I began learning ways to fight.

"First, we should decide what type of weapon you will use," said Lady Amaryllis, looking straight at me.

"Judging from her physical strength, I think shields, swords, spears, and bows would be difficult for her," concluded Lady Nemophila as Lady Nadeshiko nodded.

"But a bow wouldn't be that heavy, would it?" I asked, thinking that though a large bow may be impossible, I could at least hold a small one. However, all four women shook their heads.

"It takes strength to draw the bowstring. You need to keep it drawn while you aim, so it takes the same amount of effort as any other weapon, if not more," explained Lady Mimosa, grabbing her short bow off of her waist. She then drew it, and as she did, I could easily tell how much strength she was putting into her arms to do so.

"I don't think I could do that," I finally agreed.

At my words, Lady Nadeshiko tapped her fist on the palm of her hand.

"Why don't we give up on weapons and have her learn magic instead?" she asked.

"That sounds like it would be best," agreed Lady Amaryllis, the other two Grand Saintess candidates nodding with her.

"Do you know any magic already?" asked Lady Nadeshiko.

I answered, naming off *Clean*, *Fireball*, and *Ice Arrow*, all of which Lord Glen had taught me.

"If you know *Fireball* and *Ice Arrow* already, should you not already know how to attack with them?" asked Lady Amaryllis, looking confused.

"No, I've only used both of them at their weakest," I replied.

I'd only ever used *Fireball* to light campfires, and *Ice Arrow* to slowly drop a chunk of ice into a cup to cool drinks. When I told them that, all four women blinked in shock.

"Never thought of using magic for things like that..." murmured Lady Nemophila, who was best with magic out of the candidate trio, as she stared at me for a moment.

"If you already know how to use them, let's focus on strengthening that," announced Lady Nadeshiko, beginning the day's magic lesson. "You wouldn't be able to use fire magic anywhere where flames could spread—such as areas with withered grass, like a forest or plains. Thus, we should strengthen your ice magic, which is much more versatile."

Since I didn't think I'd be able to deal with fire if it ever spread, I agreed to strengthen *Ice Arrow*.

After a few days, I was able to shoot off a very sharp arrow of ice, but that was the easy part. For some reason, while I could always get a direct hit on still targets, I completely missed anything that moved. I was so bad at it that Lady Nemophila found it amusing. I kept practicing for quite a few days, but I missed so many times that I just had to give up.

"Everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses. There is nothing you can do about it."

"Since you always hit unmoving targets, it isn't all that bad."

"You just need to cast while I've got the enemy stopped in place!"

The three Grand Saintess candidates tried to comfort me, but I wanted to learn how to hit moving targets one day. While I had to give up for now, I swore to myself that I'd do it someday!

+ + +

After another few days had passed, it was time for us to practice camping in the Central Manor's hall.

"Tonight you all will be mock camping," Lady Nadeshiko told the four of us as we nodded along. "Normally when camping outside, you'd need to set yourselves up with a tent and take turns keeping watch overnight. However, because the Shrine of Trials is within a cave, a tent isn't required since you're already technically inside."

If we aren't using a tent, how will we be camping? I wondered as she continued.

"When camping indoors, you will instead use this box-shaped magic tool to create a barrier for the night. Anyone or anything hostile towards you will be unable to enter the barrier so you all can sleep safely without anyone staying awake to act as watch."

Magic tools like that exist?!

Lady Nadeshiko smiled as she saw me staring intently at the tool which I'd never seen before.

"Being an observer, Lady Chelsea will be the one to carry and use the tool," she said, handing me the box. There was a bright red magic stone the size of my fist attached to the front of the magic tool, which in itself was big enough to hold in two hands. "If you touch the stone for a moment, the color will change and the barrier magic will begin casting or turn off. When it is off, the stone will be red. When the spell is in effect, the stone will be blue. If it runs out of mana, the stone will become colorless."

Magic stones can run out of mana too?! I sneakily glanced at the ring-shaped magic tool on my right ring finger, and the aqua-colored stone sparkled. Since it looked to be the same color as usual, it probably wasn't out of mana.

"Now, please test turning it on."

"Understood," I replied with a nod, touching the magic stone on the front of the tool.

Before I could count to ten, the stone turned blue. In the same instant, I felt as if some sort of membrane had spread around me. Seemingly having felt the same sensation, the three Grand Saintess candidates began looking around in confusion.

"What you just felt was the barrier created by the magic tool. Please place the tool on the ground," Lady Nadeshiko instructed and I obliged. "Now, everyone, try walking away from the tool."

Taking about five steps away, I felt as if I'd gone outside of the membrane. *So this is the tool's barrier...* Lord Glen's barriers didn't have the same feeling, and I couldn't remember what my ring's barrier felt like because it was only cast in emergencies.

"On what basis does this barrier judge hostility?" Lady Nemophila asked, walking back towards the magic tool.

Lady Nadeshiko answered, "It is based on whether the one trying to pass through feels hostility towards the person who turned the device on."

"So if they're hostile towards Lady Chelsea or not, huh?" Lady Mimosa commented, nodding in understanding.

After we learned how to use the barrier magic tool instead of a tent within the shrine, we learned how we'd be spending the night within the barrier.

"Before you set out, you will be given a pouch-shaped magic tool with a storage function to store your bedding, first-aid kit, food, and water. It is an incredibly valuable tool, so be very careful with it," Lady Nadeshiko warned, showing us the pouch. It was about the size of both of my hands together and could be attached to a belt on your waist.

“A-Are you sure you mean to give us something so valuable?!”

“This is my first time seeing one, but it doesn’t look any different from a normal pouch.”

“Wow! I’m terrified I’ll end up dropping or losing it somehow!”

Judging from the three candidate’s reactions, it really was an incredibly valuable tool.

“Be sure to always have it on your person within the shrine,” Lady Nadeshiko reiterated.

There sure are lots of different types of magic tools.

“Once the barrier is set, you are to use the bedding you’ve placed inside your pouch to sleep. There are two types: a sleeping bag and a cot. You’ll be able to choose which one you’d like to use when you’re given your pouch,” Lady Nadeshiko explained as the maids brought out both types. They were each squeezed into large bags and would apparently spread out on their own once you took them out.

“I am glad a cot is one of the options.” Lady Amaryllis beamed.

“I’m used to sleeping bags since I use one whenever I stay in my research lab overnight,” commented Lady Nemophila.

She’d probably get along well with Lord Tris... I usually used a cot when we camped, so I wondered how user-friendly a sleeping bag would be.

“May we choose after testing them out?” I asked.

Lady Mimosa raised her hand and quickly followed up with, “I’d like to choose after trying them out too!”

“Yes, please use the one that best suits you.”

And with that, it was decided that the two of us would try them out first.

When I pulled the tightly compressed sleeping bag out of the large bag, it expanded at a smooth pace. Just as its name suggested, it was a bag in itself and smaller than the cot. I took my boots off and got inside; the feeling of it surrounding my body gave me some peace of mind. Since I had a habit of curling up in a ball in bed, it seemed like the better choice for me.

On the other hand, Lady Mimosa was having a hard time getting inside of the sleeping bag with her leather armor.

“I don’t like how I’d have to take my armor off to get in...” she said. Since the cot consisted of a mattress and thick blanket together, it was able to be used without removing her armor. After testing it out, she looked quite relieved.

In the end, Lady Amaryllis and Lady Mimosa chose the cots while Lady Nemophila and I chose the sleeping bags.

“Now that you’ve chosen your bedding, I will explain your food supply,” said Lady Nadeshiko, pulling a bag of food and a flask from the pouch. “Since there is no proper ventilation within the shrine, you

will be unable to use anything flammable. Please refrain from trying to use a cooking stove to heat water or use fire magic. Because time passes within the pouch's interior, you will be bringing along rations due to their long lifespan. They will consist of dried meat, hardtack, and dried fruits."

Lady Amaryllis and Lady Nemophila frowned, looking quite displeased. Lady Mimosa must not have eaten any sort of ration before because she looked puzzled. In my case, though I always snacked on dried fruits during my travels, I'd never tasted dried meat or hardtack before.

I think Brother Marx mentioned before that dried meat is hard when you chew on it as-is, and you get tired of it. Since I wanted to avoid getting tired of anything, I'd prefer to bring other food along as well.

"Would we be able to bring food other than the supplied rations along with us?" I asked, thinking that because it was a trial, we might not be allowed to bring anything but what was supplied.

Lady Nadeshiko gave me an apologetic look. "You may bring anything that you can carry yourself, but you cannot put it in your pouch. Unfortunately, the capacity of the pouches is quite low, and just storing your bedding and food will fill them completely..."

Lady Amaryllis and Lady Nemophila looked incredibly disappointed. The only ones who could enter the Shrine of Trials were the three Grand Saintess candidates and myself, so we would have to carry any other luggage. And since we could end up in a battle at any time within the shrine, it would be dangerous to bring along anything heavy. But we'd already be carrying luggage of our own so we'd need to put as little in the valuable pouch-shaped storage tools as possible...

Understanding this, I thought hard to myself. If I used my Skill, I would be able to create seeds that could grow food for us to eat. But since I'd already been asked to keep my Skill usage to a minimum while in the Shrine of Trials, I couldn't do that. I could make the seeds earlier and bring them with me, but that probably still counted as using my Skill...

But what about storing our food inside my storage room in the Spirit World? The Spirit Tree bracelet on my left wrist was connected to my personal storage room in the Spirit World, and I could put things in and take them back out. Granted, I couldn't store anything that could rot because time passed inside, unlike with an Item Box. *I don't want to tell others much related to the Spirit Tree, but I should be fine saying that I can store things and bring them back out, right?*

"Um...I actually have a spatial storage magic tool myself."

I ended up fibbing that I had a storage magic tool in my attempt to avoid mentioning the Spirit Tree. *I'm not lying to hurt anyone, so it should be okay...right?* I thought to myself worriedly as I looked around

at everyone, only to see that their eyes were all wide with shock.

“To think you have something that valuable...” Lady Nadeshiko murmured quietly.

Oh no. Is it super rare to personally own magic tools with spatial storage?! Should I have said I had a sort of Item Box which time passed inside?

While I worried, Lady Nadeshiko continued in an even quieter voice. “If it is an Item Box, I would ask you to refrain from using it since they are classified as Skills. But, if you have a magic tool with storage, you may use it all you want.”

Thank goodness I didn't call it an Item Box! I sighed in relief.

“What kind of item is it?” Lady Mimosa asked, tilting her head curiously.

Just as I was about to answer that it was my bracelet, Lady Nadeshiko put out a hand to stop me.

“You mustn't answer her.”

“Huh?” I gasped in surprise.

Lady Amaryllis spoke, looking quite worried. “You should not have even mentioned owning something more valuable than even jewels to anyone to begin with.”

They're that expensive?!

“To be completely honest, there's a chance it could be stolen,” Lady Nemophila continued.

I went pale. It wasn't actually a spatial storage tool, but a bracelet made from the Spirit Tree... It would be *really* bad if it was stolen!

“I only asked because it was so valuable, but I shouldn't have in order to keep it safe... Sorry,” Lady Mimosa apologized, bowing her head.

“No, it's okay. I'll make sure not to mention it so openly,” I said, making a zipping motion across my lips.

While an indescribable air wafted about, Lady Nadeshiko cleared her throat.

“Ahem. Let's all agree to completely forget this conversation.”

And so, we pretended that I'd never brought up anything about owning a spatial storage tool... But Lady Nadeshiko had said it was okay to use it if it wasn't a Skill. That meant I could bring preserved foods and sweets to the trial. I'd have to talk to Miss Micah later.

That night, we set up the barrier magic tool in the hall of the Central Manor, ate our dried meat and hardtack, and used the bedding we'd chosen to sleep. We had the dried meat and hardtack for breakfast too and...it just wasn't enough. The meat was hard and a pain to eat and the tough hardtack made me squirm. If we could use a flame, we could rip up the meat to make soup and then soak the

hardtack in it before eating, but...

“Camping is hard...” I muttered, getting listless nods from the Grand Saintess candidates in response.

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Though it would only be three days, eating only dried meat, hardtack, and dried fruits would sap all of us of motivation. The very same day our mock camping trip ended, I went to see Miss Micah.

“Oh, it’s rare for you to come to the kitchen, Chelsea~! What’s up~?”

“I actually have a request for you...”

I told her everything—about how we couldn’t use flames during the Floral Crucible, and that due to the size restraints of the pouches we’d be lent that we’d only have dried meat, hardtack, and dried fruits to eat.

“Would you be able to make some food or sweets that won’t go bad for us to eat during the Crucible?” I asked.

Miss Micah’s ears and tails stood up. “I want to make sure you eat well since you’re still growing~ Just wait. I’ll whip up something that’ll satisfy you~!”

The following afternoon after our combat training, I found Miss Micah in my room when I returned.

“I’ve been waiting for you~! I made lots of different things, so I want you to taste test~!”

Six carts were lined up in the room with baked goods on them. Each cart had a different sweet, giving me a glimpse of how seriously Miss Micah had taken my request.

“There are so many...” I murmured in shock, only for her to smile wryly.

“I only had what ingredients I had on hand, but I ended up making tons because I made whatever popped into my mind~”

Miss Micah had requested more ingredients from Lady Nadeshiko, but the order had yet to be fulfilled so resources were limited.

“This is just taste testing, so I’d like for all the other maids to try them and tell me what they liked too~!”

The maids all cheered when Miss Micah said that. I was relieved since it was too much for me to eat all of it on my own.

“There’s enough for the guard knights too~!” she continued, getting big smiles back from the knights. “I’ve saved some so you can eat them later, so don’t worry~!”

Could she have filled the kitchen with treats too? I wondered to myself, only for Root the Communication Spirit to pop out of the Spirit Tree bracelet on my left wrist.

«Wow! These all smell great!»

Root had raised in Spirit rank when I named him, so he could be seen by other people now. It was also technically possible for him to talk to people other than me, even before being named, but it was so difficult to do that he'd rather not do it at all.

“Great timing~! You can taste-test too, Root~!”

«Yay!» the little Spirit cheered, flying circles around Miss Micah.

“Come here, take a seat~” she urged, and I sat down at the round table near the wall. “First off are things you can eat as a meal~”

She picked up a plate of baked goods from the cart at the same time as I sat. On the plate were orange, green, and normal brown-colored cupcakes cut into bite-size pieces.

“These have carrot paste in them, and these ones have spinach~!”

Cake made from vegetables?! I wondered how they'd taste. Tilting my head curiously, I tried one of the carrot-paste cupcake bites.

“It...doesn't taste like carrot,” I commented.

Miss Micah beamed. “It's good that you aren't fussy with food~ But I don't know about the Grand Saintess candidates, so I did my best to mask the flavor of the veggies~!”

So she wasn't just thinking about me but about the three candidates too! Feeling a bit touched, I tried one of the spinach paste cupcakes next. It didn't taste like spinach either. Finally, I took a bite of the familiar brown cupcakes.

“Mmm... Is this banana?”

“Correct~! Bananas really fill you up~!”

After that, I tried simple scones, pound cake, madeleines, galette, and all sorts of other baked treats.

“They were all delicious,” I announced. I'd only had a bite of each, but they really were all good.

My maids all nodded in agreement, while the guard knights held themselves back.

«I like these best,» said Root, hugging one of the banana cupcakes left on the cart.

“He likes those,” I repeated since Miss Micah couldn't hear him.

“There are lots, so you can take that back with you~!”

«Really?! Thank you! I'm gonna share it with everyone!»

Picking up his cupcake, Root shakily flew back to me, getting sucked back into the bracelet. The fact that he'd carried it back himself showed just how much he loved it. *If there are any left after the guard knights eat, I'll give them to the Storage Spirits.*

While I thought that, Miss Micah smiled brightly. “I'll take everyone's opinions and Chelsea's reactions into account to pick what baked goods to make for the Crucible~! I hope you look forward to it~!”

It was fun to think I wouldn't know what she made until the day of.

“Thank you. I definitely will!”

She puffed her chest out and squeezed her fists in response to my thanks.



5. Early Celebration

Time just flew by after that, and suddenly it was the day before the Floral Crucible. Today, we'd be having an early celebratory tea party. Not only would the Grand Saintess candidates and I participate, but the maids, guard knights, and other workers in the Flower Garden would all join us in enjoying the food. I wore a gown while my maids and guard knights wore their usual clothing, and we headed to the Central Manor's courtyard.

The courtyard was where we'd been doing our combat training, and was completely empty, with no plant life whatsoever. I'd thought it should be called the training grounds instead, but today it looked completely different.

Around the courtyard were tall ornamental plants in pots, with a variety of colorful flowers in pots set at their base. The tall plants had adorable red ribbons tied to them as if they were dressed up.

In the north was a stage-like higher platform, while in the center were tables covered in snacks, desserts, and drinks. In the east was a chef, who would make customizable crepes for you.

It's more like a proper party than just a tea party... No, it's almost like a festival. How exciting!

On the northern stage stood the current Grand Saintess, holding a glass as she looked around.

"Now begins our early Floral Crucible celebration. Does everyone have a glass?" she asked, lifting hers in front of her face as she did. "Forget your status and roles, eat, and have a blast! Cheers!"

"Cheers!" everyone echoed. Most of them then drank whatever was in their glasses. I did the same, enjoying the delicious fizz of the little bit of apple cider that had been poured for me.

The Grand Saintess said to forget our status and roles, but...will the maids and knights who accompanied me from Chronowize be okay? Their status is so important back home... I looked over to them, worried. My twelve personal maids, excluding Miss Micah, stood hesitantly in a group on the west side. Martha moved first, starting to take food for herself from the table. Seeing this, Gina readied herself, reaching out for the desserts. The rest of my maids all looked at each other before all heading towards their favorite dishes.

My female guard knights standing to the south were on guard, taking turns to eat. The Celesark guards who had been protecting the

Northern Manor came up to them, chatting and pointing at the tables in the center of the courtyard. They must've been telling them what foods taste best.

Miss Micah wanted to give everyone a taste of the Radzuel Empire so she was absent, acting as one of the chefs for today. Apparently, the people of Celesark were unfamiliar with Radzuel's cuisine and were very curious. Seeing those who'd tried the food out of curiosity return for seconds made me happy, as if I'd been the one to make it.

I should eat too, I thought as I started walking, only for Lady Amaryllis and Lady Mimosa to approach me.

"What are you planning on sampling, Lady Chelsea?" Lady Amaryllis asked.

Smiling, I replied, "I was thinking of getting a crepe."

They cooked the crepes right there, adding whatever you wanted, so I thought that watching might be fun too.

A smile bloomed on Lady Mimosa's face. "Banana's the standard for crepes."

"Are strawberries not more popular?" Lady Amaryllis asked, looking surprised.

"Nope! Banana all the way. They're the absolute best when you drizzle them with chocolate sauce."

"Chocolate sauce pairs well with strawberries too!"

While the two argued, Lady Nemophila drifted over, pulling me by my arm to the eastern crepe ingredient station. "Don't mind them. Those two can't agree on food. Just pick what seems best to you."

"All right, I will," I said with a giggle, settling on whipped cream and flan.

The chef was thoughtful enough to add a few different fruits as well. It ended up being something like flan à la mode.

"I never considered such a choice."

"That's interesting."

"Didn't expect flan..."

The three Grand Saintess candidates all looked at my finished crepe.

"I'll get the same," said the current Grand Saintess as she walked up, ordering a crepe for herself.

"Lady Chelsea's choice looks delicious. I'll try it too." Next up was Lady Nadeshiko.

"Well then, I would very much like one as well."

"I'll have one too."

"Me three!"

Before I knew it, everyone had ordered a flan à la mode crepe. It was so amusing... The time just flew by.

Thinking that I probably wouldn't be able to use my telepathy inside the Shrine of Trials, I decided to contact Lord Glen the night before we left.

After readying myself, I used my telepathy on top of my bed.

< Good evening, Lord Glen. We haven't talked in a while, > I said.

< It's been about five days, huh? How are you? >

< I'm doing extremely well. >

< You do sound really happy. Did something good happen? >

He can tell how happy I sound even with telepathy?! Slightly surprised, I thought to myself about how to answer. Since there were restrictions on speaking about what happened inside the Flower Garden, I couldn't tell him what had happened. But since I still wanted to let him know about the early celebration we'd had, I chose my words wisely.

< Tea parties with my maids and the knights participating are fun. >

< Ah, so you had a status-less tea party. That's rare. >

I was relieved to hear that he got what I was trying to say. < It was incredibly fun. I'd love to be able to do something like it back in Chronowize. >

< It sounds interesting. Where would you want to hold it? >

< I think it'd be fun to have it in a garden or a greenhouse—a place where there are beautiful flowers. >

< Then...it'd probably be buffet-style, what with all the people who would be attending. >

< Yes. It would also be fun if there was someone there who could cook the food you want right there, like back at the party we attended in Radzuel. >

Just by answering his questions, I could let him know what today's party had been like. I decided to stop talking about myself then and ask about him.

< Where are you in Celesark right now, Lord Glen? >

< We're in the capital already, actually. >

< Huh! Really? >

He chuckled, amused. < We got here sooner than expected, maybe because the roads in Celesark are so well-serviced. >

< That might be true... Carriages don't shake much since there are so few wheel tracks. >

< You'll be participating in the Floral Crucible for the next three days, right? Can we talk again the evening that you finish? >

< Yes, absolutely. >

< I'm looking forward to it, > he said, sounding very happy.

After that, we said our nighttime goodbyes and ended the telepathic conversation. I'd see him in four days after the Floral Crucible was finished. Thinking about seeing him for the first time in two whole months made me so happy that my chest might burst.

6. The Floral Crucible: Day One

The day of the Floral Crucible had finally arrived.

We all stood in front of the entrance to the Shrine of Trials, located east of the Northern Manor. Today, the three Grand Saintess candidates wore the same clothing they'd been wearing during our battle training.

After discussing things with my maids, we decided I would wear a tunic, pants, and boots instead of a dress. The tunic reached just above my knees and had slits on both sides; it was incredibly easy to move in and the knees of the pants were made with a thicker fabric than the other pieces to help prevent getting hurt if I ended up falling. We'd chosen the boots based on ease of movement too. Stored in my breast pocket was the blue magic stone pen that I was given as my coming-of-age flower gift.

"As you're all here, I will now distribute these," said Lady Nadeshiko, handing each of us a spatial storage pouch. "Please check and make sure that your chosen bedding is within."

Opening the flap of my pouch, I could see a sleeping bag, flask, and food inside. Since I'd chosen the sleeping bag, I nodded at Lady Nadeshiko. The three candidates also nodded, so everyone had gotten their bedding of choice.

"I will be giving this to Lady Chelsea," continued Lady Nadeshiko, handing me a shoulder bag containing the barrier box magic tool. Since it was in a shoulder bag, I probably wouldn't drop or lose it. After putting the bag on, I checked inside to make sure the box was there.

"Normally, the current Grand Saintess would use this time to give you all some words of encouragement, but she was unable to attend due to one of the protective devices acting up. She has left a letter instead, so I will read it aloud for you," she said, pulling a letter out of an adorable pink envelope.

"To the Grand Saintess candidates and Lady Chelsea—who has come to oversee the Floral Crucible—I greatly apologize for being unable to see you off. Unfortunately, I had to rush to check one of the defensive devices that was producing an error. I always wish that there was another Grand Saintess. If there was, we could have one of us go fix the device while the other one says goodbye to all of you."

This trial is something given to future Grand Saintess candidates by the

first Grand Saintess herself. Don't give up. Believe in your own efforts as you go forward. The path will definitely open for you.

Candidates, head to the Room of Selection while keeping Lady Chelsea safe and sound. Lady Chelsea, make sure to watch the candidates' actions. All of you, have as much fun as you possibly can!

The Grand Saintess, Freesia."

After reading the contents of the letter left by the current Grand Saintess, Lady Nadeshiko showed it to us.

"Have fun,' she says..." Lady Amaryllis commented, reading the end again.

"She didn't tell us to be careful," Lady Nemophila continued, touching a hand to her chin in thought.

"Wonder what that means?" Lady Mimosa said, looking blankly.

Since we were about to set off on the Crucible, "be careful" would probably have been the better thing to say, but... I tilted my head, slightly confused, as Lady Nadeshiko heaved a sigh and explained.

"The current Grand Saintess used to be known as the, um...'Goddess of Destruction.' She used to lead the charge on expeditions to exterminate the monsters pouring forth from the Demonic Forest..."

"So you mean to say that she ended the letter that way because she enjoyed the adventure during her time within the Shrine of Trials?" Lady Amaryllis asked, getting a nod back from Lady Nadeshiko.

"Then we'll just have to enjoy ourselves too." Lady Nemophila chuckled.

After giving Lady Nemophila a little bow, Lady Nadeshiko stood herself up straight. "Now then, you should get moving soon."

We all straightened ourselves up, giving her firm nods.

In unison, we all said, "We're off!"

After our declaration, everyone who had come to see us off waved. Gina and Martha, my personal maids, Miss Micah, all of the female guard knights, everyone working at all of the manors who had attended yesterday's party—they all watched us head inside the shrine.

The temperature inside the Shrine of Trials was lower than outside, and so felt a bit chilly. The path was more than wide enough for all four of us to walk side by side. As we got out of range of the light from the entranceway, the lamp-shaped magic tools in the shrine's ceiling replaced it. They were spread out systematically and the orange light they put out was suitably bright so that we wouldn't have any problems seeing. The floor was easy to walk on too, being paved with flat stone.

The current Grand Saintess mentioned in her letter that the first

Grand Saintess had created the Shrine of Trials, and that was at least a few thousand years ago. *It's so strange to see that it's still so well-maintained.*

As I was thinking that, we encountered a wall. The path continued to the right and went slightly downhill. When we followed it farther, we hit another wall, where the path also continued downhill to the right. But this time, the wall we hit had writing carved on it.

"What is this?" I wondered as all three of the Grand Saintess candidates stared at the writing.

"I believe this is written in the languages of each of the races from the age of myths. But is it not impossible to read without a Sage-level [Appraisal] Skill?" asked Lady Amaryllis.

"Could it be a message left by Her Ladyship, the first Grand Saintess? I would assume it was written in each language's script so that any race who came through could read it," Lady Nemophila surmised.

"Can we even make out just one letter?" Lady Mimosa whined.

After the three looked at each other, Lady Amaryllis spoke again. "Let us see if we can."

At her words, they all began staring intently at the wall. I followed suit. Suddenly, I froze up. Among the various markings, I could see the language of the Beastmen.

"Um...I found something I can read."

"What?" they all echoed.

Since I had the title "Savior of the Radzuel Empire," I was treated the same as a Beastman and could read their language. Apparently, it didn't limit that understanding based on the era.

"What does it say?" Lady Nemophila asked, looking shocked.

"Some precautions... Watch your step—the environment will change as we progress. If we have any problems, we need to push the Emergency Button located at the entrance of each room. The man-made golems are here to maintain and manage the shrine, while the slimes exist to clean, so try not to get in their way... That's it," I said, reading everything out.

The three looked confused.

"The environment will change as we progress'... Does that mean the interior is similar to a dungeon?" wondered Lady Amaryllis.

"Since it says 'the entrance to each room,' that must mean there are a number of rooms inside," concluded Lady Nemophila.

"We aren't supposed to get in the golems and slimes' way? Weren't they supposed to be enemies?"

There were so many things we didn't understand.

"There's one thing we can check for now," I said, pointing down the passage that continued to the right. There, we could see a slime

meandering along that looked exactly like the plushes from our battle training.

“A slime...” Lady Mimosa murmured, lifting her great shield as she slowly approached the slime. She got close enough to it that her shield nearly touched it, but the slime didn’t react. It just kept on puttering around, as if it was cleaning the floor.

“It does not seem hostile or malicious...” Lady Amaryllis said, looking dumbfounded.

“We know that both the golems and slimes are safe thanks to reading the ancient script, but it seems that the message was muddled as time went along. It’s probably why they’re seen as enemies we need to defeat now,” deduced Lady Nemophila as Lady Mimosa walked back to us.

“So the slimes aren’t enemies.” Lady Mimosa nodded in understanding, watching the slime clean the passage.

After that, we passed by the slime and headed downhill along the path. Just as we lost sight of the wall where the precautions were written, we encountered flowers of various colors.

“Hm? Did we go back outside?” wondered Lady Amaryllis.

I shook my head. “There’s a ceiling, so it seems to be a room.”

The field of flowers was surrounded by trees, making it seem as if it were outside. But looking up, there was a ceiling high above with tons of magic lamps in place of the sun.

Lady Amaryllis asked, “Is this what the precautions meant by the environment changing?”

“The floor’s gone from paved to dirt—or rather, flowers,” commented Lady Nemophila.

“If we kept walking the way we were, we would’ve tripped over them,” Lady Mimosa said.

I could remember reading in a book that dungeons where monsters dropped magic stones had different environments on each level.

While I was recalling that, Lady Nemophila pointed and said, “There is a golem.”

Looking in the direction she was pointing, there was a golem sitting on the ground, fiddling with something.

“What is it doing?” Lady Amaryllis asked curiously.

Lady Mimosa raised her great shield.

“I’ll go check!” she said, approaching the golem. We all followed behind her.

When we got close enough to see what it was doing, we learned that it was pulling the weeds from in between the flowers and collecting them in a basket sitting beside it.

“It’s weeding...” I murmured, as all three of the Grand Saintess

candidates relaxed.

“It looks like the golems and slimes really *aren’t* enemies,” said Lady Mimosa, lowering her shield.

“Next, we should see if we can find the emergency button that’s supposed to be at the entrance to each room,” said Lady Nemophila, turning in the direction we’d come.

“Let’s go check it out!” Lady Mimosa said, and we all headed back.

On the wall to the right side of the entrance was a round red button the size of my hand. Surrounding the button were the words “Emergency Button” in each ancient script. There was also an explanation of the room on the wall beside the button.

“This room is a re-creation of a botanical garden from the first Grand Saintess’s homeland.” I read the Beastman script out loud, prompting confusion in the trio of candidates.

“Does that mean that Her Ladyship wanted to show us Her homeland?” mused Lady Amaryllis.

“Was Her homeland ever recorded?” commented Lady Nemophila.

“It might be that the first Grand Saintess’s homeland is gone...” whispered Lady Mimosa.

Since it said “re-creation,” Lady Mimosa was probably right. My shoulders drooped sadly.

Lady Nemophila spoke again, “Let’s keep going for now.”

We all nodded, then made our way through the room while taking care not to step on any flowers.

“There’s a golem over there,” said Lady Mimosa, who was leading us. When I looked to where she was looking, I saw a golem picking wilted flowers.

“So it is thanks to these golems that this room is kept beautiful...” Lady Amaryllis softly commented.

We walked along, thinking about what a strange place it was, and finally came to the exit.

“Though we know that the golems and slimes aren’t enemies now, we should still scout out the passage to make sure,” said Lady Nemophila.

During our combat training, we were told to watch out for slimes in the passages between rooms since they commonly appeared there.

Lady Mimosa raised her great shield again as she checked out our path.

“The slimes are just cleaning. None are hostile,” she said.

Relieved, we all left the flower room.

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Following the downhill passage lit by magic lamps, another room

came into view.

“This room seems to be a rest spot,” surmised Lady Nemophila, looking at said rest spot on the left side of the room.

“There’s a picture of a mountain here,” said Lady Mimosa, walking towards the huge image of a rock structure on the right-hand wall.

Lady Amaryllis took a step inside, then looked to the wall beside the entrance. “Here is the emergency button and the room’s explanation.”

I followed suit, taking a step in and turning. Then, I read the Beastmen’s script aloud. “This room is for us to sit and have lunch in. The mountain on the wall is one from the first Grand Saintess’s homeland called ‘Mount Fuji.’”

“I have never heard such a name before,” murmured Lady Amaryllis.

“Her homeland probably wasn’t in Celesark then,” said Lady Nemophila.

“So the first Grand Saintess was born in another country and then founded the Holy Kingdom of Celesark somewhere else? Isn’t she so amazing?!” Lady Mimosa marveled.

Each of the three candidates chimed in with their comments after I read the explanation.

“If this is where they intend for us to eat our lunch... Then, shall we?” Lady Amaryllis suggested.

We all nodded at her suggestion, heading to the table and bench on the left side of the room from the entrance, across from the picture of the mountain. The trio immediately reached into their pouches, pulling out their dried meat, hardtack, and water.

“Please, wait.” I stopped them, having four paper bags returned to me from the Spirit Tree bracelet on my left wrist. Then, I passed them all out. They each took a bag, looking at it curiously. “I had these made for our lunches. I’ve heard that while dried meat will fill our stomachs, it isn’t good mentally... Please, eat these sandwiches instead,” I continued, repeating what Miss Micah had told me.

“My, how wonderful!”

“This is actually a huge help.”

“Thank goodness. I can’t stand dried meat!”

They all said their bit, looking incredibly relieved.

Opening the bag and looking at the sandwiches within, Lady Nemophila let out a small groan. There were four sandwiches inside: one made with fried egg; one made with lots of ham; a veggie sandwich with cucumber, tomato, and lettuce; and a strawberry jam sandwich.

“I’m not much for cucumbers...” she muttered with a forced smile,

so I traded her my ham sandwich.

After we said our prayers to the earth gods, we dug into Miss Micah's homemade sandwiches. The fried egg sandwiches were soft and slightly sweet, giving you a happy feeling when eating. The tomatoes in the veggie sandwich were delicious and sweeter than I expected.

Just as I was about to start on my strawberry jam sandwich as dessert, a thin golem walked up to us holding a tray. Even knowing that it wasn't hostile, it was still a bit nerve-wracking. As I rushed to eat my jam sandwich, the golem moved like a veteran maid, setting four teacups on the table and serving us a pot of tea.

"Thank you very much..." I said nervously, and it left, walking away with a peculiar step.

"Their faces look like masks, so you cannot tell what expression they are making. It appears to be happy, however..." Lady Amaryllis said in wonder.

"I'll have to rethink my perception of golems..." murmured Lady Nemophila.

"It was skipping, wasn't it? Like the thing people do when they're happy?" commented Lady Mimosa.

So that's called "skipping," I thought. "It seemed much more like an ally than an enemy," I said, getting strong nods back from the trio of candidates.

"Maybe it was happy it was able to serve us?"

"We were told to destroy them on sight. I guess our training meant nothing, huh?"

"A-Actually, I kinda feel bad about that now!"

Since no one had been able to read the precautions, everyone had treated the golems as enemies and defeated them, but they were probably actually created to take care of the Grand Saintess candidates.

"Let's drink our tea before it gets cold," I said.

"Right. It went to the trouble to make it for us, after all," Lady Amaryllis agreed. The other two candidates nodded as well, and we all relaxed and drank our warm post-meal tea.

+ + +

Leaving the room with the mountain image, we headed through another downhill passage.

"I wonder what kind of room we shall find next?" Lady Amaryllis said cheerfully.

"It'll probably be something we'd never expect," Lady Nemophila replied with a chuckle.

"I'm so excited!" Lady Mimosa continued, jumping gleefully.

“Maybe the first Grand Saintess made the Floral Crucible to entertain the next Grand Saintess candidates?”

“I wonder if that is actually the case,” said Lady Nemophila, tilting her head.

The two rooms we’d already passed through had one thing in common: they were modeled after the first Grand Saintess’s homeland.

“Maybe she wanted to pass down the memories of her home?” I wondered out loud.

Lady Amaryllis nodded. “That might be it.”

As we were talking, the next room came into view.

“It’s kinda dark in here,” muttered Lady Mimosa, peeking into the room.

She was right. It was darker than in the passages, similar to sunset. To the middle-center of the room was a cliff, and on top of that was a building with lights on. A forest could be seen to the left of that.

“Let us read the room’s explanation first,” suggested Lady Amaryllis.

I nodded, reading the words on the wall to the right of the entrance. “It says that this room is a re-creation of a hot spring resort from her homeland. We’re supposed to spend the night here...”

The three Grand Saintess candidates cheered happily when I finished reading.

“Hot springs are the best way to melt away the day’s fatigue,” Lady Nemophila commented, smiling brightly.

“Have you been to a hot spring before, Lady Chelsea?” asked Lady Mimosa.

“Yes. There are hot springs close to the royal capital,” I answered. I thought back to making onsen eggs with Lord Glen.

“Her Ladyship, the first Grand Saintess, loved bathing. She ordered that hot springs and bathhouses be created all throughout the country,” Lady Amaryllis told me.

“She loved them enough to make one of the Floral Crucible’s rooms a hot spring resort, huh?” murmured Lady Nemophila.

“Hot springs help you recover from exhaustion, and they’re great for your skin too! I can’t wait!” cheered Lady Mimosa.

The trio chattered as we walked towards the resort.

“I’m glad. I thought we wouldn’t be able to bathe during the Crucible,” I said.

Lady Nemophila nodded in agreement and said, “The first Grand Saintess had a saying: ‘fatigue is water-soluble.’ It’s said to mean that you should make sure to soak yourself in the bath and relax.”

Thinking about how fun that saying seemed, we walked through the curtain at the resort’s entrance. As we entered through the door, a golem wearing an apron handed each of us a towel. I took mine,

surprised at how thick and soft it was. Once it finished passing them out, the golem moved its arm, as if urging us to go farther inside.

“Are you asking us to come in?” Lady Amaryllis asked.

The golem gave her a nod in reply. They couldn’t talk, but they seemed to understand human language.

As we headed further inside, another golem beckoned to us. We glanced at each other and decided to follow it. Walking along the strangely squeaky floorboards, we came to another spot with a short curtain entrance. The golem stood beside it, motioning for us to go inside.

“Looks like the changing room,” Lady Nemophila said, peeking inside through the split in the curtain.

“The room’s explanation said to rest at the resort, so let’s go on in!” said Lady Mimosa, walking inside.

“That is true. The first Grand Saintess created this place, after all. We should enjoy it,” agreed Lady Amaryllis, following her.

Left behind, Lady Nemophila and I nodded to each other and stepped through the curtain.

+ + +

After we all enjoyed our baths to the fullest, a golem escorted us to a room on the second level. Inside were four beds with fluffy comforters and a large dining table set.

“We didn’t actually need to carry bedding for ourselves, huh?” Lady Mimosa muttered, smiling wryly.

I bobbed my head along. I never thought we’d have proper beds, much less a whole inn.

“If there are beds for us, will they also prepare our dinner?” wondered Lady Amaryllis, only for the golem who’d led us here to shake its head.

“Nope,” said Lady Nemophila with a bitter smile, voicing what the golem was thinking.

“I had baked goods made for us, so let’s eat them,” I told everyone.

Lady Amaryllis smiled happily, while Lady Mimosa raised both her arms and cheered. Lady Nemophila patted me on the head, just like Lord Glen did.

“We can’t thank you enough, Lady Chelsea,” Lady Nemophila said before heading to the dining table.

For our first day’s supper, we had the veggie cupcakes. The three Grand Saintess candidates looked at them curiously at first, but once they started eating, they couldn’t stop. They were finished in no time.

“If only we had some fruit or something for dessert,” I murmured apologetically.

Since time passed inside my personal storage room in the Spirit World, I'd been told to avoid storing anything that could rot. That was why I had only brought things that could be stored long-term like baked goods and dried fruits.

When I said that, the golem, who had been making tea for us, started moving faster. After serving each of us a cup of tea, it silently left the room.

"Did it just start moving quicker than before?" I wondered.

"It did."

"Looked like it was rushing."

"It left in a big hurry, huh?"

I'd asked because I thought I had imagined it, but the trio all agreed with me.

As we sat there drinking our tea, the golem returned. In its hand was a bowl full of strawberries.

"Strawberries?" I said questioningly, and the golem nodded. Then, it placed the strawberries on the table.

"They look juicy," observed Lady Nemophila, looking at the berries carefully. The outsides were shiny, while the stem was fresh... No matter how you looked at them, you could tell they were freshly picked strawberries.

"Is this our dessert?" Lady Amaryllis asked, getting another nod from the golem.

"That means it left to go get them since Lady Chelsea said she'd like some fruit for dessert. Does that mean it will bring us things we ask for?" Lady Nemophila wondered, but the golem just seemed troubled.

"Could it be that you'll prepare meals for us if we ask since this is a hot spring resort?" I asked, and got a nod back.

"So if we'd asked for them to make us dinner when we first got here, we would have been able to eat it once we finished our bath?" continued Lady Nemophila, who got more vigorous nodding back from the golem.

"We would have said if we needed dinner or breakfast if we were staying in a normal inn as well," murmured Lady Amaryllis in understanding.

Lady Mimosa gasped. "So if we ask you to make us breakfast tomorrow, you will?"

The golem nodded again, then gestured for us to eat the strawberries.

"It went through the trouble of gathering these for us. Let's eat up," said Lady Nemophila, reaching towards the strawberries.

"Thank you for bringing them for us," I said, nodding at the golem before I started eating.

The next morning, we awoke in our beds, which were the perfect firmness.

“Are these sheets not softer than the ones in the Flower Garden manors?” commented Lady Amaryllis as she sat up, stroking the fabric.

We all got out of bed and headed to the dining table. As we did, four golems wearing aprons entered the room. Then, they set our breakfast out on the table. Round white bread, omelets, bacon, salad, corn soup, and more strawberries for dessert... I was shocked at how fancy our breakfast was.

Then, the golems all left, save one waiting in the corner of the room.

“Are you the same golem as yesterday?” I asked, and got a nod back.

After we said our prayers to the earth gods, we began eating.

“There is cheese within these omelets,” commented Lady Amaryllis.

“And olives in this salad,” observed Lady Nemophila.

“The bread and soup are still hot?!” cried Lady Mimosa.

“It’s delicious.”

I never expected we’d be eating a full, proper breakfast inside the Shrine of Trials. Despite our shock, we still ate our fill.

7. The Floral Crucible: Day Two

After getting a proper night's sleep and having a satisfying breakfast, we left the hot spring resort. It was bright outside as if it were dawn.

"The lamps are probably lit to match the time of day outside of the shrine," Lady Nemophila explained.

After leaving the room with the resort, we started down another downhill path. Despite seeing slimes cleaning the passageway, we weren't worried. After a short walk, we arrived at the next room—Room Four. This was the biggest one yet, with gently sloping hills, thickets of trees, meadows, and little lanes.

"Are these...mountains?"

"They're little enough to just call them hills."

"We'll find out once we read the room's explanation!"

I looked towards the wall to the right side of the entrance and saw one word written there: "Orienteering."

"What is orienteering?" I asked the three candidates.

Unfortunately, they seemed to be just as confused as I was. They must not have known what the word meant either.

"I'm not sure what we're supposed to be doing, so let's just get walking," said Lady Nemophila.

"But we don't know where we're supposed to go!" objected Lady Mimosa, shaking her head.

As the four of us stood there at a loss, a large-bodied golem hobbled towards us. I was a bit leery of it since it was the first time we'd encountered a golem so big. The trio of candidates must have felt the same because they quickly moved to guard me.

Noticing how we reacted, the big-bodied golem stopped a few paces away from us and held something out in its palm for us.

"A compass...and some paper? No, wait, these are maps..." murmured Lady Mimosa, who was at the very front with her great shield.

I looked up at the golem's palm and saw it was holding a number of paper maps, each with the text in a different language.

"Are we supposed to pick a map that we can read?" I wondered, only for the golem to give me a nod back. It was almost a bit of a let-down seeing it move the same way as the golem who had prepared our breakfast. We all calmed down, then took the compass and the

map written in the language of the Beastmen.

“What does it say?” Lady Amaryllis asked.

Pointing to the upper part of the map, I read off the explanation. “Orienteering is a game where you use a map and compass to pass through checkpoints as you head towards a goal. Though it is normally a competition, they’d like for the four of us to have fun and deepen our friendship.”

“I see. While golems and slimes have ended up being viewed as enemies through years of mistaken information being passed on, the intent for the Grand Saintess candidates and the observer to become friends passed down just fine.” Lady Nemophila nodded in understanding.

I continued, reading the bottom part of the map. “The rules are that we have to head to each of the three marked checkpoints and receive proof that we passed through. Once we have obtained proof from all three, we’ll need to head to the goal... Or so it says, at least.”

“That sounds quite fun,” Lady Amaryllis giggled, smiling amusedly.

“I wanna know what we’ll be getting for proof! Let’s get going!” At Lady Mimosa’s urging, we set off towards the first checkpoint.

“It looks to be the top of the hill,” commented Lady Nemophila.

Since the checkpoint was at the top of the very gently sloping hill, we reached it easily without getting lost. At the top were about ten little golems who were about stomach height to me. They were all holding hands and spinning around. As we watched the strange dance, they suddenly stopped, then handed me a flower bookmark.

“Is this the proof we passed through?” I asked and they all nodded in unison. Their movements were so synchronized that it was a bit scary.

Next, we headed to the second checkpoint.

“This checkpoint appears to be out in the meadows,” said Lady Amaryllis.

We headed back along the same path we took to the first checkpoint, then veered off onto a byway down the hillside. In the center of the meadow was a thin golem who greeted us reverently. The second piece of proof that we’d passed through was a flower crown, which it politely offered to Lady Nemophila.

As soon as she took it, she immediately placed it on my head.

“Why give it to me?” I asked, being very careful to keep it on my head.

Looking serious, Lady Nemophila answered, “Seems best for you to carry them, doesn’t it?”

Lady Amaryllis and Lady Mimosa nodded in agreement.

Though I still didn’t really understand, we began making our way

to the third checkpoint.

“Looks like it’s in a thicket this time,” said Lady Mimosa.

Consulting the map, the third checkpoint was in the middle of a thicket on the opposite side of the hill. We backtracked a bit then cut right through the hillside and headed for the trees.

When we got to the marked location, there was an open area where three large-bodied golems were waiting. One of them kneeled down and held out a single flower.

“Take it, Lady Chelsea,” Lady Amaryllis urged.

I walked forward and took the flower from the golem.

A flower bookmark, flower crown, and an actual flower... Now that we had all three items to prove we passed through, we could now head for the goal near the room’s exit. As we walked along the path to the goal, we could see tons of golems waiting for us in the distance—probably more than fifty in total.

“Kinda scary, huh?” Lady Mimosa said, forcing a smile.

I think we should be fine, just judging from how the other golems acted, but... Though we were apprehensive, we continued making our way towards the group of golems.

When we arrived, one of the golems walked up to me and checked our proof of passing through the checkpoints. Once it was finished, the whole group of golems clapped, moving aside to make a path for us.

“I wonder if we would’ve had to fight all these many golems if we couldn’t read the directions...” I murmured, getting an iffy look from the three Grand Saintess candidates. If I hadn’t been able to read the Beastmen’s language, we would’ve come to the exit empty-handed and had to force our way through the golems blocking our path.

“Just imagining fighting against so many enemies is making me feel faint...” sighed Lady Amaryllis.

“I definitely would’ve run out of mana...” commented Lady Nemophila.

“I’m not sure if we could even beat them all!” cried Lady Mimosa.

After each woman had their say (looking incredibly melancholic with the idea as they did), we left the room. Passing through the exit brought us to another downhill passageway.

“Should we not be approaching the Room of Selection and heading back to the entrance soon?” Lady Amaryllis wondered.

“We’ve spent about a day and a half down here. I’m not quite sure how long this takes,” answered Lady Nemophila.

“Forget about that. Isn’t it about time for lunch?” Lady Mimosa asked.

While they were all talking, a huge number of slimes began dropping from the ceiling. It happened so suddenly that Lady Mimosa

reflexively raised her great shield and I quickly moved a few steps behind her. Lady Amaryllis moved to our right with her sword out, while Lady Nemophila went to the left with her staff.

As soon as we got into our well-practiced battle positions, I heard giggling from in front of me.

"I just put up my shield 'cause I was surprised. You guys are way too good!" Lady Mimosa said, continuing to giggle.

"Just how much do you think we trained?" Lady Amaryllis huffed, feigning indifference. Lady Nemophila silently nodded in agreement.

Seeing them like that made me start to laugh too, which in turn set the two of them into giggling fits. But despite taking a moment to get the laughs out of our systems, the mass of slimes didn't move an inch. *What's wrong? Normally, we only see a single slime cleaning at a time...*

"Huh. They aren't moving?" It seemed that Lady Mimosa thought it was odd as well because she stepped forward to try to push them out of the way with her great shield.

But as soon as she took a step, the ground crumbled loudly under both her and the mass of slimes.

"Lady Mimosa...!" I shouted and tried to reach out to her, but I was too late. She and the slimes had already fallen. Lady Amaryllis and Lady Nemophila must have been afraid that I'd fall too because they held me up.

Once the loud noises stopped, we could hear Lady Mimosa slowly call out. "I-I'm aliiiiiiive!"

"Th-Thank goodness..." If we could hear her, that meant that she had to be fine. I was so relieved that I went a bit limp.

"Lady Chelsea, let us take a step back and compose ourselves," Lady Amaryllis urged.

We all took a few steps back from the huge hole impeding our path. As I flopped down to the ground, Lady Amaryllis sat down beside me.

"We're here with you, don't worry," she said, giving me a tight hug.

Huh? Is she...shaking? It seemed like she might have been even more shaken up than I was.

"We need to get a grip on the situation first... *Light...*" Lady Nemophila said calmly, raising her staff and casting a spell.

She then looked at the hole and slowly lowered her magical light down.

"Judging from how fast she hit the bottom, she probably fell about four stories," she concluded before yelling down into the hole. "Mimosa, tell us what happened down there."

"The slimes cushioned my fall and a big golem caught me, so I'm

not badly hurt.”

The slimes and golems saved her!

“Now that we know she is all right, we need to think of how we shall proceed,” murmured Lady Amaryllis, still hugging me. She’d stopped shaking, but since she hadn’t let go of me yet, she was probably still worried.

“Even if we’re able to pull Mimosa back up, the hole in the ground is too big for us to go any farther.”

“And we can’t be sure if the path past it will be safe either.”

Now that I thought about it, we had stopped here because the mass of slimes dropped down in front of us. Maybe they were telling us it was dangerous.

“Is there a path down there?” Lady Amaryllis shouted down into the hole.

“Probably!”

Hearing Lady Mimosa’s response, I thought to myself, *The floor crumbling under us has to be the kind of “unforeseen circumstance” that Lady Nadeshiko was talking about. That means it would be okay for me to use my Skill!*

“If there’s a path, we should all get down there,” I said, willing my plant encyclopedia back from my storage through the Spirit Tree bracelet on my left wrist.

“That does seem like the only option,” Lady Amaryllis agreed.

“But how will we get down?” asked Lady Nemophila.

I opened my book to a certain page and showed it to them. “I want to try making a seed that will grow into a plant ladder.”

I’d used my [Seed Creation] Skill to make a seed that grew into a fruit filled with cookies in front of the three Grand Saintess candidates, and they’d even eaten the cookies themselves.

“If I use this plant that hangs downwards as a base, I should be able to create a seed using a simple blueprint,” I explained, pointing to the plant on the page.

The both of them nodded.

“Let us put our faith in Lady Chelsea’s Skill.”

“Yeah. That’d be the best option.”

And so, we started discussing what kind of plant to create.

“When something doesn’t already exist, I need to draw up a blueprint first,” I explained, taking the aqua pen-shaped tool made of magic stone off of its spot on my chest. Then, I wrote, “A Seed That Will Grow A Ladder” in the air.



“Wow, you are writing in midair!” Lady Amaryllis cried out in surprise.

“Is that one of those new pen magic tools that can write and be erased anywhere?” Lady Nemophila asked.

I nodded. “It was given to me as my coming-of-age flower gift from my family...and my fiancé,” I answered, blushing a little bit. The two of them gave me warm looks.

“Lady Chelsea’s fiancé must be quite taken with her if he helped with the gift.”

“He’s definitely closing in on her.”

The two women were whispering to each other about something, but I couldn’t quite make it out.

Though I was a terrible artist, I drew a plant growing into a ladder shape and going down a wall in the air. It’d probably be best if it was thick and strong to make sure we could go up and down on it. When I wrote that, Lady Amaryllis spoke up.

“I think it would be best if it was made of something difficult to slip on. If any of us were to fall, we would end up just like Miss Mimosa.”

“That’s true.” I nodded, writing “hard to slip on” to my midair blueprint. “Is there anything else?”

The two candidates shook their heads. For a final touch, I added the usual “one generation—disintegrates into fertilizer at my signal” to the end.

“Why did you write that?” Lady Nemophila asked, tilting her head.

“Because...every seed I make *always* grows—and grows fast, at that. I try to add this kind of effect most of the time to ensure it doesn’t negatively affect other plants.”

The big venus flytrap seed I’d made in a hurry wilted after one night but left a single seed after that, so I couldn’t say “all” my seeds.

“So you’re thinking of the ecosystem... That’s great,” Lady Nemophila said, blinking in surprise before giving me a pat on the head. She did it the same way that Lord Glen did, which warmed my heart.

After that, I read over the blueprint a few more times, letting my imagination grow. *Since I’m using it to save someone, safety has to be my number one priority!*

With that in mind, I murmured, “I’ll make a seed that grows into a ladder like in my blueprint—[Seed Creation]!”

With a light *pop*, a flat, square seed about the size of my thumbnail appeared in the palm of my hand. It was my first time seeing a seed that was so perfectly square. Lady Amaryllis and Lady

Nemophila also looked at it curiously.

Normally, I'd have Lord Glen appraise my seeds first to make sure they were exactly what I was wishing for, but none of us here could do that. I just believed in myself and pushed the seed into the dirt at the side of the hole, just a little bit under the stone paving. The moment I did, the seed budded and started growing vines in the form of a ladder with a *slithering* sound, going further and further down the wall. It seemed that the roots were especially thick because the stone pavings got pushed up a little bit.

As we watched it grow, the *slithering* sound stopped.

"S-Some ladder thing just dropped down!" Lady Mimosa cried. That let us know that it did indeed reach the bottom.

"Now we must figure out what order we should go down in..." Lady Nemophila said.

After a bit of discussion, we decided that Lady Amaryllis would go down first, then Lady Nemophila, and finally me. They wanted to go down first so that they'd be able to catch me if I fell.

"I will try descending then," said Lady Amaryllis, looking nervous as she stepped down onto the ladder.

I watched her, worried that the vines might snap or something halfway down since I'd planted the seed without having it appraised.

"I have reached the bottom," she called up a few moments later.

Next, Lady Nemophila went down smoothly.

"I'm here too," she said a moment later.

Last up was me, and since I'd made the mistake of looking down when stepping on the first rung, I was nearly frozen in fear. Quite honestly, the fact that I had to go down four stories terrified me! But somehow, I managed to get down to the bottom.

I looked around and it seemed we were in some sort of field where various types of vegetables were being grown.

"Lady Mimosa, are you all right?" I asked her, seeing her still in the big golem's arms.

"I'm fine, but it won't put me down," she replied, scratching her cheek with her left hand. When she did that, I could see that her left sleeve was ripped and her arm was bleeding.

"You're hurt!" I cried frantically.

"Huh? Seriously? I hadn't even noticed. I must've smacked it on something," she said, looking at the wound before giving me a strained smile. I'd heard that injuries only hurt once you realize you have one. That meant she was probably feeling it now that she'd noticed.

"Let us do some first aid," said Lady Amaryllis, reaching into her pouch-shaped magic tool and pulling out the first aid kit.

"No, I can heal it right now! I'll make a Potion Seed—[Seed

Creation]!” Wishing for something that would heal Lady Mimosa immediately, I made a Potion Seed she could drink. “If you drink this, it’ll heal up in a second!”

When I handed it to her, Lady Mimosa looked a bit confused, but she took the little cork out and drank the contents. The second she did, her eyes widened.

“What the heck? This is amazing! It stopped hurting as soon as I drank it, and my wound is completely healed!”

Those words shocked both Lady Amaryllis and Lady Nemophila, who looked at the spot where she had been hurt.

“She’s right. Not even a scar left.”

“I had thought it before, but the seeds Lady Chelsea creates are quite amazing...” Lady Amaryllis commented, making me feel a little bit bashful.

“Um, since it’s healed, we should wash the blood away,” I started saying in an attempt to hide my embarrassment.

Suddenly, the large golem holding Lady Mimosa started walking. We followed behind, and it led us to a well. After setting Lady Mimosa down on a nearby log, it started drawing water. While it was doing that, a golem wearing an apron came out holding some clean cloth.

“Wait, can you golems communicate with each other?” Lady Nemophila asked. She got a nod back from the apron-wearing golem as it cleaned the blood off of Lady Mimosa’s clothing with the well water.

Once Lady Mimosa’s clothes were clean, we all sat down on the log to rest.

“We fell under the passageway, but this place feels the same as the rooms we’ve passed through already,” commented Lady Nemophila and we all nodded. When I looked, the golems were nodding too.

“Does that mean that if we keep going down this path, we’ll end up at the Room of Selection?” Lady Amaryllis asked.

The golems nodded again.

“Since the golems are nodding, we should keep going,” I said.

The three Grand Saintess candidates all looked shocked, heads turning towards the golem in the apron.

“I was so caught up in the conversation that I had not even noticed,” Lady Amaryllis commented, making me giggle at how weird she sounded.

“Yeah, we could keep going, but I think we should eat our lunch first!” Lady Mimosa said, holding her stomach.

Now that I thought about it, I was also hungry after all the walking we did during our orienteering.

“Let’s have lunch then,” I said, taking the canelés that Miss Micah

made for us out of my personal Spirit World storage. All of the canelés looked the same, so we wouldn't know what flavor they were until we ate them.

"Mine tastes of tea."

"This one is honey."

"Mine's banana!"

"Mine is chocolate."

We all had a grand time eating our lunch. After we finished eating, the apron-wearing golem made us tea, moving just like an experienced maid.

"Isn't that the golem from this morning?" Lady Amaryllis asked.

"Yeah, the way it has its apron on looks similar."

"It makes tea the same way, but couldn't it be that golems just all move the same way?"

As the three Grand Saintess candidates talked among themselves, I decided to ask, "Are you the golem that's always making tea for us?"

The golem must have been happy because it nodded repeatedly.

"If it's the same golem that we met at the hot spring resort, that means there was a door somewhere in there that leads to other rooms," deduced Lady Nemophila, getting another nod from the golem.

Once we'd all drank our tea and taken a break, Lady Amaryllis stood up.

"Shall we get going?" she asked.

We all stood up at her words.

"Would you be able to lead us to the exit?" I asked the golem after it cleaned up our dishes and walked back over to us.

It nodded, and we followed the apron-wearing golem outside of the room. Then, we began walking through a passage where two of us could barely fit beside each other. Actually, it was probably better to refer to it as a hallway.

"This is not the path we should normally be taking, is it?" Lady Amaryllis asked, getting a nod back from the golem. She was definitely right. We'd been walking through the hallway for a while, but we hadn't suddenly come up to any room entrances.

"Tons of doors though," Lady Mimosa commented, opening one nearby. Inside were lots of golem parts, with sparks flying deeper inside.

"Are they...repairing golems?" murmured Lady Nemophila, peering through the doorway. The golem nodded again.

"The Grand Saintess candidates taking the Floral Crucible up until now had been fighting the golems, hadn't they... Does that mean the broken golems get repaired here? I feel so bad for them..." Lady Mimosa said, closing the door softly.

We continued walking further down the hallway as the magic lamps dimmed.

“The sun is probably setting soon... We will have to find somewhere to sleep,” said Lady Amaryllis, only for the golem leading us to come to a halt.

“It’s thinking... Or, wait. Maybe it’s asking the other golems where to put us?” guessed Lady Nemophila as she observed.

After a few minutes, the golem led us to a room a bit farther down the hall. Inside were pure white sheets, bed covers, blankets, and towels. It appeared to be a linen closet.

“We will be able to use all these sheets as beds, yes?” Lady Amaryllis asked, pointing towards the stacks. The golem nodded again.

For night number two, we had a dinner of the scones and madeleines that Miss Micah made for us, and I slept on top of a big stack of bedcovers in my sleeping bag.

8. The Floral Crucible: Day Three

Though I didn't feel quite as great as I'd been the morning before, today, I woke up fairly refreshed. Sleeping in a bed still made waking up a lot better than sleeping in a sleeping bag.

As I stretched, a golem came in and made us some tea, being very careful.

"Why's it being so careful about its surroundings?" Lady Nemophila wondered, only for Lady Mimosa to respond.

"Well, we're in a linen closet, aren't we? It wouldn't want to get the sheets and stuff all dirty."

That sounds about right, I thought, and accepted my cup of tea from the golem with a, "Thank you."

With freshly brewed tea in hand, all of us dug into Miss Micah's homemade baked goods. Once we finished eating, we left the linen closet and started walking down the hall again, only to run into a dead end.

"Is this not the end of the hall?" Lady Amaryllis asked, tilting her head.

The golem leading us stopped and stood along the side of the wall, gesturing for us to continue.

"Should we just stand in front of the wall?" I wondered, moving right to it. As soon as I did, the wall split apart, and I could see into a large room.

"Huh?!" All four of us exclaimed at once.

The golem just kept gesturing for us to go inside, so we did. When I turned around, the golem in the apron was standing in the very middle of the hallway, bowing to us.

"Is this where we part?" asked Lady Amaryllis.

The golem raised its head and clasped its hands together. The moment it did, the wall began to close.

"Thank you for all your help, Miss Golem!" I rushed to thank it, and it nodded back in reply before the wall closed completely.

"That sure was a helpful golem," Lady Nemophila murmured as Lady Mimosa nodded and rubbed at her eyes.

Feeling lonely, I looked around the room we were in. There was a huge, elliptical-shaped mirror directly across from the spot at which we entered, and I could see a passageway to our left. On the left wall of the passageway were an emergency button and an explanation of

the room written in many different languages.

"If the room's got an emergency button, then that must mean we're back on the right path..." said Lady Nemophila happily.

Lady Amaryllis looked over at me nervously. "What does the explanation say?"

I immediately started reading. "This is the Room of Selection—where the next Grand Saintess will be chosen. We need to face the large mirror over there and call the first Grand Saintess's name."

"So we are finally at the Room of Selection!" remarked Lady Amaryllis.

"What we're supposed to do here has been passed down just fine, huh?" added Lady Nemophila.

"We gotta call Her Ladyship, the first 'Grand Saintess,' right? Let's get to the mirror already!" declared Lady Mimosa.

All three of the Grand Saintess candidates cheered at my words before moving in front of the mirror. I followed, standing behind them. Then, the trio counted down before all saying the first Grand Saintess's name in unison.

"Lady Sakura!"

I'd have to state which one of them was best suited for the role of Grand Saintess once they'd said her name. And I would need to state my opinion clearly.

As I was thinking about my role here, a bright light shone from the mirror, forcing us to close our eyes.

"Huh?!" I heard Lady Mimosa cry.

The light eventually subsided, and I nervously opened my eyes. Reflected in the mirror was a woman I'd never seen before. Her shiny, golden hair sparkled, reaching the ground, and her large blue eyes were fringed with long eyelashes. I was shocked to see someone more beautiful than Ele, the Spirit King. The woman in the mirror smiled.

"I am Sakura, the first Grand Saintess," she said, voice as clear as a singing bird.

The first Saintess...? Herself?

I was frozen in shock and awe, so she...Lady Sakura continued speaking. "I am immortal and undying... Normally, I slumber, but every ten years I wake to choose and acknowledge the Holy Country of Celesark's next Grand Saintess."

The three Grand Saintess candidates also seemed shocked, just blinking at her.

"You all must have cleared the Floral Crucible if you've come this far. Allow me to congratulate you," Lady Sakura said from the mirror, a smile blossoming on her face.

"Thank you ever so much!" the candidate trio said in unison, standing up straight and using their left fists to tap on the right side of

their chests.

“Permit me a question. For the last few thousand years, all candidates have arrived near sundown. But you are all here before noon. How were you able to come at this time?”

The girls all looked at each other before explaining how the path crumbled beneath us as we walked down the passageways.

“What the heck?! That’s so dangerous!” Lady Sakura said, eyes widening, speaking in a completely different way than she had at the beginning. “Were you hurt? Are you all okay?”

“The slimes and golems protected us,” explained Lady Mimosa.

Looking relieved, Lady Sakura sighed. “Thank goodness...”

She seems like a really nice person. I thought to myself as the question I’d been thinking since she appeared spilled out.

“Um... Lady Sakura, you are the Proxy, are you not...?” I asked for clarification.

She gave me a blank look. “Yes. I am the first Grand Saintess of the Holy Country of Celesark, and also the Proxy who brought prosperity to this world.”

So she is the Proxy...

“It has been several thousand years since my slumber began, so I thought that title to be lost. How do you know of it?” she asked, tilting her head.

She’s been sleeping for that long? Though I was interested in what she’d said, I answered her question for now. “Ele... Element, the Spirit King, said that the first Grand Saintess of the Holy Country of Celesark was the Proxy.”

My response made Lady Sakura’s jaw drop. “Seriously?! You mean Ele’s come back to this world?!” She seemed to be shaken, because she started pacing on the other side of the mirror.

Huh? But didn’t the Proxy see me in the mirror and say she couldn’t forgive me? And didn’t her male attendant see that and tell “the Worshipers of the Proxy, Driven by Envy” to kill me for her? I didn’t understand why she was reacting this way.

I tilted my head in confusion and asked, “Why didn’t you know that Ele had come back?”

“I mentioned a minute ago, but I’ve been mostly *sleeping* for the past few *thousand* years. I only ever wake up once every ten years when the Grand Saintess candidates and the observer visit the Shrine of Trials. Of course, I don’t know what happened while I was sleeping.”

“Then why were you after my life if you were sleeping...?”

“Wait...what?” she asked flatly. “Why the heck would I wanna kill someone I’ve never even met before?!”

Neither of our stories matched up, so the Proxy Lady Sakura and I

decided to talk it out.

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On the other side of the mirror, an exquisitely made golem—that you might mistake for a human—carried out a chair for Lady Sakura to sit in.

“I shall have them bring you a sofa,” said Lady Sakura, and then huge golems came into the room carrying a sofa and table.

The three Grand Saintess candidates and I sat down on our sofa. Meanwhile, the golem in the apron we just parted with moved like an experienced maid to make us some tea. I didn’t really get how, but apparently, Lady Sakura could send orders to the golems in the Shrine of Trials.

“You may speak first,” she said.

I told her all about everything that had happened. How I’d used my [Seed Creation] Skill to create a Seed of the Origin Spirit Tree, and that after planting it, I’d met and contracted to Ele, the Spirit King. I recounted how a “Worshipper of the Proxy, Driven by Envy” had threatened the Radzuel Empire, and how those worshippers had targeted me and the second Origin Spirit Tree. I followed that up with how believers in the Proxy had threatened the Martec Republic.

As I listed off the events, Lady Sakura’s brow furrowed. “Okay, there is *so much* I wanna get at here! One sec...I’m just gonna talk normally, so you Grand Saintess candidates just pretend you didn’t hear me...” she said with a huge sigh, flopping back against her chair. It appeared that she was going to act normally as well.

The trio of candidates seemed to gather that something was up, because they all nodded.

“So you knew I was the Proxy because you contracted to Ele. I was shocked, since I never expected him to contract with someone else,” she started, as I recalled how Irene the Great Spirit of Fire had said the same thing. “And these ‘Worshippers of the Proxy, Driven by Envy’? Let’s just set the whole ‘worshippers’ thing off to the side for now.”

Lady Sakura made a motion as if she was moving a box from the right to the left.

“Like, do I *look* like I’m driven by envy here?” she asked, looking towards the Grand Saintess candidates.

The three girls frantically shook their heads in unison.

“You do not seem to be driven by envy!”

“You look...like a normal person.”

“Like a pretty, bright lady!”

After hearing the trio’s answers, Lady Sakura looked back at me.

“How do you see me?” she asked.

From speaking to her, Lady Sakura didn't seem strange at all. *Being "Driven by Envy" would mean she'd be agitated, right?*

"Your eyes look energetic..." I answered. "And you don't seem like the type of person who would hurt another because of envy."

Lady Sakura nodded in satisfaction before staring at the palm of her hand. "I just appraised myself, but my occupation is just 'The Proxy.' It doesn't say anything about me being driven by envy."

Since I didn't have the [Appraisal] Skill, I couldn't tell what her results could be. I tilted my head, not quite understanding what she meant, and she gave me a wry smile.

"Basically, 'The Proxy' and 'The Proxy, Driven by Envy' are two different people."

"So...there's a fake Lady Sakura?"

"Sounds like it, yeah." She responded to my question with a nod before starting to get angry. "Just thinking that *someone* is messing around while I sleep... Argh! How infuriating! And the fake is called 'The Proxy, Driven by Envy'? What the heck!"

It seemed that she was really upset, because she'd grabbed the pillow off of the back of her chair and was smacking it. As she did, the exquisitely made golem who had been waiting off to the side came over and tried to hold her hands down. We couldn't hear anything, but it seemed it was saying something.

"You're right... No sense in beating up a pillow. Gotta use this anger on the *right* person," Lady Sakura muttered with a sigh, straightening her posture. "I'll tell you my side now... I was summoned by one of the creator gods who made this world, and reincarnated here."

Creator...god? A god? I wonder if it's a different god from the earth one I pray to before I eat...

"Rein...car...nated?" I slowly repeated.

"It means I died once before getting born again here."

I kind of understood, but I also kind of didn't. *So she means that death isn't the end, and that she's been reborn to live again?*

While I was thinking that over, she continued, "When I got reincarnated, I got some amazing powers and an immortal, undying body... Then I spent a long time bringing prosperity to the world with the Spirit Trees and the Spirits, but at some point, I got mixed up with this weird man. Stuff happened, and I did what he asked, or rather, I got desperate and...I kinda...burned down the Spirit Tree..." Lady Sakura said, shoulders drooping.

"I should've known that without the Origin Spirit Tree, Ele, the King of Spirits, would disappear. I always wondered why I did something that stupid, and I've regretted it ever since. Living got so hard, but I couldn't even die since I was immortal... I ended up asking

the remaining Great Spirits to put a barrier around my home. Then, aside from waking up every ten years to select Celesark's Grand Saintess, I've holed myself up with my golems and slept," she confessed, making me feel bad for her. "You said you're Ele's contractor, right? Where is he?"

"Ele is currently carrying a cutting of the Spirit Tree, so he isn't here," I replied, only for Lady Sakura to tilt her head in confusion. "Since people related to the Proxy were doing bad things, he decided he'd need to go directly to you to talk about it. But to do that, we needed the Grand Spirits to take down the barrier they made and—"

"And you need to plant trees roughly a whole country's distance away from each other to call for the Great Spirits, right?" Lady Sakura said, interrupting me.

I nodded back, and she looked worried.

"Ele coming back to this world and calling the Great Spirits... This is definitely all happening to the creator god's liking," she muttered to herself, then gave me a huge smile. "I wanna give the baddies who say they're related to me a piece of my mind. Go tell Ele to hurry up and plant those trees so we can lower the barrier!"

"Will do." I nodded back.

Lady Nemophila raised a trembling hand. "Please forgive me for speaking out of line...but is it not impossible to speak of what happens in the Flower Garden outside of it?"

Now that she mentions it, I couldn't tell Lord Glen about anything here with my telepathy, even when I tried.

"Ah... I did set the Flower Garden up like that, didn't I?"

"Wh-What should we do?" I panicked.

Lady Sakura stared at all four of us. Or, to be more specific, above our heads. The way she was looking seemed just like what Lord Glen always did when he appraised someone. She'd mentioned appraising herself earlier, so it probably wasn't just my imagination.

"I could change the barrier's settings, but that'd have some widespread effects. But my appraisal says Little Miss Ele's-Contractor has a strange skill, so I'll use that instead!" she said with a smirk.

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"Okay, let's make a seed that'll let you talk about what happened in the garden outside of it!" Lady Sakura announced after we took a break for lunch. Said lunch had been a chicken and veggie pasta made by the golems of the Shrine of Trials.

"When I'm creating a new type of seed, I need to draw up a blueprint," I explained. If a seed already existed, all I had to do was say its name to make it, but when something didn't exist yet, I needed to write up a blueprint and read it over a bunch of times.

When I told her that, Lady Sakura looked confused. “You mean you can’t just wish, ‘I wanna make a seed that’ll let me talk outside the Flower Garden!’ and boom! A seed appears?”

“I’ve tried to do it without thinking up a blueprint before, but the seed that came out was weird...”

Figuring that it would be easier to show her than tell, I used my Skill.

“I’ll make a seed that will let me talk about things outside of the Flower Garden—[Seed Creation]!” With a little *pop*, a tiny slime-like seed appeared in my hand. Showing it to her, I said, “They come out like this.”

“What the heck?! Sure, it’s called ‘Seed that will let me talk about things outside the Flower Garden,’ but it also says that it melts everything around it when it grows!” Lady Sakura said, holding her stomach as she cackled. Once she was finished laughing, she spoke again with tears in the corner of her eyes. “What kind of seeds can you make that come out properly?”

I rested a hand against my chin as I named them off. “Blue and Sky Lily seeds that absorb miasma; an Elixir Seed that heals all status effects; Aopo Seeds that restore half of your mana; Potion Seeds that heal your wounds when you drink them; Shining Grass seeds that light up and dim at my command, Soil Improvement Seeds that put mana into the ground; then we have Water Seeds, Cookie Seeds, Lamp Seeds... I’ve also made seeds that grow into cutlery or a table.”

Lady Sakura tilted her head, confused. “Huh? Are you a Reincarnator too?” she asked, staring above my head as she started appraising me. Sighing, she said, “Guess it was just my imagination...”

Since the word “Reincarnator” was similar to the concept of “reincarnation” that she had explained earlier, I could tell it meant someone who was reborn.

“Why would you think I was a Reincarnator?” I asked, thinking it odd.

She smiled bitterly. “One of the seeds you made was called an *Elixir*, wasn’t it? That word is from my world... My past life’s world, so I just wondered.”

Hearing her say that made me remember when I first created an Elixir Seed.

“The Elixir Seed was suggested by His Highness Glenarnold, younger brother of Chronowize’s king, and His Majesty Royz, Emperor of the Radzuel Empire,” I said. “It’s a round seed filled with medicinal liquid with a little cork in it.”

Lady Sakura’s eyes widened at my explanation. “So the king’s little brother and the Emperor are *both* Reincarnators?!”

I wasn’t sure, since I’d never heard it from either of them, but I

figured it was quite probable from her response.

“Ah, but they’re both guys, right? I’d wanna talk to them if they were Reincarnators, but I really don’t wanna deal with men that much...” she murmured with a sigh. “Never mind... Let’s get to making the blueprint.”

I nodded.

“Grand Saintess candidates, you help us think too!” Lady Sakura said to the trio, who looked relieved after we’d ignored them the whole conversation. “Since it’s hard to think of something from nothing, let’s pick a plant to base it on. Okay, girlie in red, what’s your favorite flower?” she asked, pointing at Lady Amaryllis with her red knight-like top.

“Ah, um... Pansy!” Lady Amaryllis clearly hadn’t expected to be singled out, so she rushed to think of an answer.

I then used my aqua-colored magical pen to write “Based on a pansy” in the air. Lady Sakura looked at my pen for a moment before shaking her head as if to forget something.

“Next is the shape. I think I wanna make it the same shape as Elixir Seeds or Potion Seeds.”

Apparently, her idea of a seed that would let me talk about things outside of the Flower Garden was drinkable.

“This is the shell of the Potion Seed I drank yesterday,” said Lady Mimosa, pulling the empty seed out of her pocket.

“You kept it?” I murmured, only for her to scratch her face with a finger.

“I didn’t wanna just throw it away anywhere...”

She has a point.

While I was thinking that, Lady Sakura pointed at the drinkable Potion Seed in Lady Mimosa’s hand. “Okay, we’ll make it shaped like the one that the girl in yellow is holding!”

I drew a picture of a corked seed in the air.

“What do we need to think of next...?” Lady Sakura asked.

Lady Nemophila spoke up, speaking politely, “If the seed is drinkable, should we not decide on its flavor?”

“Good idea. What’ll we make it taste like? You suggested it, so you pick, blue girl.”

Shocked at being singled out so suddenly, Lady Nemophila froze.

After a minute, she looked as if she had an idea and spoke. “Wh- Why don’t we go with apple juice?”

“Why apple juice?” Lady Sakura asked in wonder.

“No, um... I’d heard before that Your Ladyship, the first Grand Saintess loved apple juice...” Lady Nemophila responded in a panic, only for Lady Sakura’s eyes to light up.

“Nice for you to know that. I do love apple juice!”

I wrote “Tastes like the apple juice that the first Grand Saintess loves” in the air.

While I was thinking of other things to add, Lady Sakura suddenly spoke, looking serious. “Given how I’d imposed the restriction that things said in the Flower Garden are top-secret and not to be spoken of, it’s become part of Celesark’s history—like a tradition. I don’t want to mess that up just for my own selfishness, but I want you to tell Ele no matter what... I want to make it so all you can say is what we’ve discussed in this room, and that only you as Ele’s contractor can do it.”

I felt something warm in my chest as I realized how much Lady Sakura treasured Celesark, the country she’d created.

“Then why not make it so that it will only work for a bell per seed, rather than working forever once drunk? That would keep things secret,” I suggested.

She looked back at me, touched, and clasped her hands together as if she was praying. “You’re such a good girl. I’m glad you’re the one Ele contracted to.”

My face heated up at the sudden compliment.

The seed would only work for a bell after being drunk, only let me speak about what happened within the Shrine of Trial’s Room of Selection, and wouldn’t work at all on anyone but me... I also wrote that it would wither if you tried to plant it in the soil, just like the Elixir Seeds. While the seed would only work on me, I couldn’t be too careful.

“How is this?” I asked, showing the finished blueprint to Lady Sakura and the Grand Saintess candidate trio.

“Looks good!” said Lady Sakura, prompting the trio to nod.

I read the finished blueprint over and over again, letting my imagination grow. Once I’d confirmed not only the color and shape but also the effect in my head, I used my Skill. “I’ll make a seed according to the blueprint—[Seed Creation]!”

With a little *pop*, a round, corked seed that was a little bit bigger than my fist appeared in my open palm. It might have been the largest drinkable seed I’d created yet.

“Lady Sakura, could I ask you to please appraise this seed?”

When I asked her to do the same kind of appraisal that Lord Glen always did, she gladly accepted.

“The seed’s name is ‘Secret Seed: Room of Selection Edition,’ and it has the annotation that only one of it can exist at once. If you want to create a second seed, you’d have to destroy the first one. The effect it has is to let you speak of what we’ve discussed in the Room of Selection in Celesark’s Flower Garden outside of it. It lasts for just two hours, and only works on the Spirit King Element’s contractor. It tastes

like the apple juice that the first Grand Saintess loved.”

After she read off the effects, Lady Sakura seemed to realize something. “Wait, if it says that it tastes like the apple juice the first Grand Saintess *loved*, does that mean it’ll taste just like the apple juice from my old world?”

“Yes. I specified that the seed be exactly as the blueprint said, that would mean it tastes just like the apple juice you want it to taste like.” Since I could make any seed I wished for, I just had to wish for it.

“So you could make a seed filled with the chocolates I like too...?”

“I could indeed,” I stated.

Lady Sakura fell into thought for a moment before suddenly speaking.

“Hey...I wanna talk with you a bit more. Can you stay here another night?” she suggested.

I personally didn’t mind staying another night since I also wanted to talk to her more, but... *What about the other three girls?*

When I glanced at them, they were awkwardly nodding. It must have been hard for them to be ignored as Lady Sakura and I just kept talking... And also, they probably couldn’t say anything against the first Grand Saintess’s wishes.

I crossed my arms, feigning that I was thinking.

“I know I’m being selfish, but this is the first time I’ve had this much fun talking to anyone in thousands of years. Please! Just stay one more night!” Lady Sakura begged frantically.

I nodded. “I don’t mind staying another night, but I’d like for you to do something I request as well,” I said before looking at the candidate trio. “The current Grand Saintess complained to me that she was so busy that she wished there was another Grand Saintess too. Would you be able to make all three of them Grand Saintesses?”

“Huh?!” Both Lady Sakura and the trio cried out in shock.

“Lady Freesia, the current Grand Saintess, told me that for the past ten years she’s had nearly no time off at all. Between going to check and restart all of the defensive devices and participating in events, she’s constantly busy.”

“What? There’s no time off?”

The candidate trio shook their heads at Lady Sakura’s question.

“Before I was a candidate to become the next Grand Saintess, I was Her Ladyship...Lady Freesia’s guard. Though she made sure to give all of her guards proper time off, she was always working without rest because there was no one else who could do what she did,” explained Lady Amaryllys.

“I acted as Lady Freesia’s guard before becoming a candidate as well, and because she proactively participated in ceremonies along with inspecting the defensive devices, she has barely ever had a day

off in these ten years,” added Lady Nemophila.

“That reminds me. She had a letter given to us when we left. In it, she apologized about not being able to see us off because the devices were doing something,” continued Lady Mimosa.

Lady Sakura’s jaw dropped, and she looked absolutely shocked.

“No days off. It’s totally a black company... And the defensive devices are doing bad enough that she *doesn’t* get a day off?! I need to do something—and quick! Ah, but I can’t get out past the barrier... What the heck were you doing, past me...!” she groaned before heaving a huge sigh. “Okay. Even forgetting about the whole staying or not staying thing, I’ll make *all* of you Grand Saintesses.”

Great! This means that they don’t have to shoulder it alone! I thought in relief.

Suddenly, Lady Sakura shouted, “Seriously! Tell Ele to get those cuttings planted ASAP! Once this barrier is gone, I’ll go check on all of Celesark’s defenses myself!”

And so, it was decided that we’d stay in the Shrine of Trials for one extra night.

“Since I’m being selfish in keeping you longer, I’ll put things into Entertainment Mode,” Lady Sakura continued.

With that said, beds, a dining table, and fancy food were all carried into the Room of Selection, and we had a very fun night.

Interlude 2: The Three Grand Saintess Candidates

Once the first Grand Saintess Sakura and Chelsea were asleep... Nemophila quietly got out of her bed and woke up Amaryllis in the bed beside her.

“What’s wrong...?” Amaryllis murmured, rubbing her sleepy eyes.

Nemophila just pointed at the bed where Mimosa was sleeping.

“You want me to wake her?” Amaryllis asked for clarification.

“As quietly as you can, yes.”

Though Amaryllis looked confused, she woke up the other woman. Once awoken, Mimosa seemed to still be half-asleep, but Nemophila saying “We need to talk about something important” was enough to wake her up properly.

The three moved to the edge of the room.

“So what is this important thing we need to talk about?” Amaryllis asked.

“It’s about what’s happened in the Shrine of Trials,” Nemophila said, sighing. “Once we leave here, we’re definitely going to be asked what happened.”

“Two nights and three days turned into three nights and four days, so yeah, they’d definitely ask,” Mimosa commented, and Amaryllis nodded as well.

“That’s why I thought we should figure out exactly how much we’d tell everyone about what’s happened here and what we’ve heard.”

“That’s right. With what was discussed, we should decide before we leave,” Amaryllis said, agreeing with Nemophila. Mimosa didn’t seem to object, because she nodded too.

“We’ll decide one by one... First is...?”

“Lady Chelsea being able to read the words on the wall, maybe?” suggested Mimosa.

“We should mention that.”

“Yeah. If we can have the future candidates taking the Floral Crucible avoid fighting by just reading, that’s a good idea,” agreed Nemophila.

“And that the golems made us tea, and how we rested at the hot springs resort and ate there too?” asked Mimosa.

“We should tell them about all that as well,” agreed Amaryllis.

“We can tell it to the past and current Grand Saintesses, but keep it from future candidates...” added Nemophila.

“What about me falling into a hole?”

“That is probably something we should mention,” Amaryllis affirmed.

“Yeah, they’d need to know you were all right, Mimosa.”

“So, basically, we can tell them about everything that happened before we got to the Room of Selection?” Mimosa asked, and the other two women nodded. “Then, the biggest thing we need to decide is if we’re gonna say anything about Chelsea and Her Ladyship the first Grand Saintess’s conversation.”

“I do not believe we should tell them everything about that,” argued Amaryllis.

“We should, but we shouldn’t either...” fretted Nemophila.

“But it’d be bad if we didn’t mention anything at all.”

The three groaned in unison.

“Her Ladyship appearing is something that the former and current Grand Saintesses would already know from undertaking the Floral Crucible themselves, so that should be safe to say,” Amaryllis said, getting nods from the other two back.

“The problem is everything after that. What’ll we do about what Lady Chelsea was talking about?”

“It’d be a good idea to tell them about Lady Chelsea being targeted, so we can go save her if anything happens,” suggested Mimosa.

“Wonderful idea,” Amaryllis beamed.

“Then we’ll tell them about what Lady Chelsea said,” Mimosa replied.

“What about what Her Ladyship was saying about the age of mythology?”

“That is something we should never have heard... We should keep that to ourselves,” murmured Amaryllis.

“Right...”

“And what about Lady Chelsea’s seed?” Amaryllis continued, only for a voice to come through the mirror.

“Keep that a *secret*.”

The trio of candidates nearly jumped out of their skin in shock before turning to look at the mirror. The speaker was Sakura, the first Grand Saintess, yawning near the edge of the reflection.

“She made it because I wanted it, and it’d probably cause a fuss, so... *Please?*” Sakura said, clapping her hands together.

The three nodded. There wasn’t a single person here who wouldn’t do what the first Grand Saintess, who created the Holy Country of Celesark, wanted them to do.

“Ah, but make sure you say that I wanted you all to stay another night to talk if asked why you’re late. They need to know that it was me being selfish and that you guys didn’t do anything wrong. Also, tell them that all three of you are going to be Grand Saintesses,” Sakura continued before disappearing from the mirror.

The three candidates all looked at each other.

“Her Ladyship is so kind for worrying about us...” Amaryllis sighed.

“But I don’t really think we should be that straight with why we were late...” Nemophila mused.

“I mean, Her Ladyship wants us to say it, so we should...” said Mimosa.

After the trio all said their bits, they crawled back into their beds with mixed feelings, happy but also apologetic.

9. The Grand Saintess Selection

Last night, Lady Sakura and I had been urged into bed early by our respective location's golems. Right before we went to sleep, I'd been talking about how I was engaged to Lord Glen, and Lady Sakura said she was jealous.

"When you're immortal and ageless, there aren't really any people you can spend your entire life with..." she'd whispered.

I'd never forget the lonely expression on her face as she uttered those words. Remembering that the next morning as I woke up, I saw that she was already up and reflected in the room's large mirror. *It's rare to see someone so beautiful rubbing the sleep from her eyes.*

I giggled to myself, and Lady Sakura noticed I was watching.

"Morning. You're up early," she said.

"Good morning. You're up early as well, Lady Sakura."

We were speaking quietly since the three Grand Saintess candidates were still sleeping. Smiling happily, Lady Sakura's eyes started wandering.

"Um, so, I was thinking about it all night, and... Wanna be friends?" she asked.

"Me...?"

"You. So stop with the 'Lady,' okay?"

"Then I'll just call you Sakura. You can call me..." I started, only for her to cut me off.

"Stop right there!" she said, crossing her hands in an X shape. "Me saying a name means me choosing the next Grand Saintess, so I won't ask your name right now. Tell me later, with the other three."

Now that I think about it, she never once called me by name yet. I nodded in understanding, and she giggled.

A little while later, the golem wearing an apron came carrying our breakfast, and the smell woke up the three Grand Saintess candidates. We all ate breakfast with Sakura through the huge mirror and then had some after-meal tea.

"Oh yeah, can I tell her about what we talked about last night?" Sakura asked, looking towards the trio.

They all looked at each other and nodded before turning their gazes to me.

"Last night, after you fell asleep, Her Ladyship and us all had a discussion," Lady Nemophila started before going into detail.

Basically, since we'd be getting back a day later than planned, we were definitely going to be asked what happened. It seemed that the trio and Sakura had decided what they'd talk about and what they'd keep a secret.

"It's fine for you all to discuss what happened outside of the Room of Selection, but the stuff the two of us talked about... Definitely wouldn't be a good idea to mention much of it at all," Sakura said.

The three Grand Saintess candidates then told me what they would and wouldn't mention.

"We will absolutely speak about you being targeted, Lady Chelsea," Lady Amaryllis said.

"Feel free to ask us whenever you need help," Lady Nemophila added.

"We're always on your side, Lady Chelsea!" Lady Mimosa beamed.

Hearing the three say that warmed my heart.

"Thank you," I said, getting smiles not only from the trio but Sakura as well.

"Now, I'd better send you guys home, huh?" murmured Sakura a bit sadly.

The golems then took the beds, sofa, and other things out of the Room of Selection to return it to its original state. I wanted to talk with her more, but I also wanted to finish the Floral Crucible and tell Ele that she wanted him to plant the Spirit Tree seeds as soon as possible.

"I now begin the Grand Saintess Selection," Sakura started as a bright light shone around the mirror. "Tell me your names, candidates."

At her words, the trio said their names.

"I am Amaryllis Bloom."

"My name...is Nemophila Ostbalt."

"I'm Mimosa Nordheim."

They each made a fist with their left hands and tapped it on the right side of their chest.

"Now tell me yours too," Sakura said, looking at me.

"I am Chelsea Sargent," I replied, giving her a Chronowize lady's curtsy.

Sakura smiled in amusement, then... "I'll give all four of you the Crest of the Grand Saintess."

"Huh?" I blurted out.

Sakura giggled, giving me a bold smile. "I said I'd give it to you *all* last night, didn't I?"

I mean, she *had* said that, but I hadn't thought I was included. I wasn't the only one shocked too, because the three candidate's eyes were all wide.

“Becoming a Grand Saintess means my mana will be flowing into you for ten years. Use that mana to restart the defensive devices,” Sakura continued, looking towards the trio. “The Crest also has the effect of protecting the Grand Saintess themselves. Since that fake Proxy is targeting you, I figured I’d give it to you, just to be safe.”

If she was giving it to me to protect me, I had no choice but to accept. I nodded in resignation, and she switched her tone and manner back to what it was when we first met.

“Grand Saintess of Red, Amaryllis Bloom. Grand Saintess of Blue, Nemophila Ostbalt. Grand Saintess of Yellow, Mimosa Nordheim. And Grand Saintess of Cherry Blossoms, Chelsea Sargent. I appoint all four of you to the station of Grand Saintess,” Sakura said as the back of my left hand got hot and a crest appeared. “Grand Saintesses of Red, Blue, and Yellow, devote yourselves to the Holy Country of Celesark. Grand Saintess of Cherry Blossoms, visit me...on the other side of this mirror.”

As she finished, the heat on the back of my left hand subsided and the cherry blossom crest disappeared. Flower crests had appeared on the left hands of the Red, Blue, and Yellow Grand Saintesses, but they lingered, standing out boldly.

“I hid your crest and title for you, Chelsea.” Sakura gave a playful wink as she waved at us. “See you later!” she finished, reflection disappearing from the mirror, leaving only us.

“We’re all Grand Saintesses...” Lady Mimosa murmured as a floaty feeling enveloped us, before seemingly transporting us elsewhere.

The next thing I knew, we were standing at the entrance to the Shrine of Trials, where a large group of people was waiting for us.

“Ah, thank goodness you’re all safe...!” said Lady Nadeshiko, looking teary-eyed. All four of us collectively looked at her in confusion, and she explained, “You returned so late after the expected time. We were worried sick.”

Now that she mentioned it, we stayed a third night in the Room of Selection, so we were much later than we were supposed to be.

“We would like to speak of the details as to why we were late at a later time, in another place,” I said.

Since the details are what they are, it’d be best for us to only speak about them with people we trust. As I thought that, Gina and Martha came rushing up to me.

“Lady Chelsea! Thank goodness you’re all right!” Martha said in tears.

“You aren’t hurt, are you?” asked Gina worriedly.

“No, I’m not hurt. I’m sorry for being late, but I’ve returned,” I answered, before getting bear-hugged between the both of them.

While I was busy being hugged, Lady Nadeshiko spoke to the

three now-former-Grand Saintess candidates. “Your Ladyship, please show us the back of your left hand.”

In unison, the trio all held out their hands. They each had a crest on the back of their left hands: bright red for Lady Amaryllis, an almost aqua-blue for Lady Nemophila, and a bright yellow one for Lady Mimosa.

“Could it be...that you have all become Grand Saintesses?!” Lady Nadeshiko cried in shock as the three nodded.

“It came to be decided that we would all become Grand Saintesses after Lady Chelsea spoke of what she’d heard from Her Ladyship Freesia, the Grand Saintess,” Lady Amaryllis explained, keeping Sakura’s name out of it.

Lady Nadeshiko’s eyes nearly popped out of her head.

“Amaryllis got the title of Grand Saintess of Red. I’m the Grand Saintess of Blue. And Mimosa is the Grand Saintess of Yellow,” Lady Nemophila announced proudly.

“From now on, we’re gonna work together and devote ourselves to Celesark!” Lady Mimosa said with a big smile.

Taking a moment to collect herself from the astonishment, Lady Nadeshiko put her hand on her head and said, “Please...let me ask you all about it later, in another room...”

+ + +

It seemed that it was custom for the new Grand Saintess to debut at the sanctuary in the holy capital on the same day they were decided. While the maids began preparing to head there, the three Grand Saintesses and I would be answering the former Grand Saintess Lady Freesia and Lady Nadeshiko’s questions. We gathered in a room in the Central Manor, each sitting down on their own sofa. Since the maids were busy getting ready, there were no drinks.

“Now, would you please tell me why you were all late coming back?” Lady Nadeshiko asked, getting nods back from the Grand Saintess trio.

“It was because Her Ladyship, the first Grand Saintess, asked us to stay another night to speak to her,” Lady Amaryllis said resolutely.

Lady Freesia’s eyes opened wide in shock. “You mean...you actually got to talk with Her Ladyship?!”

“Yeah, we talked normally... She was even worried about us...” muttered Lady Mimosa, prompting Lady Freesia to cover her face with both hands.

“I so want to punch me from ten years ago for being too afraid to talk to her...” she lamented.

Ignoring Lady Freesia, Lady Nadeshiko asked, “Would you be able to tell us the specifics?”

“The truth is, both She and I have a common acquaintance...” I replied. “We found we got along quite well, and ended up talking about them for a long time.”

Lady Nadeshiko’s jaw dropped.

“Wh-What sort of things did you talk about?” Lady Freesia asked, leaning in towards me.

Remembering what Sakura had said could and couldn’t be talked about after we had breakfast, I told them what I was able to.

“Lady Chelsea is being targeted? That’s unforgivable!” Lady Nadeshiko cried, shaking her tightly gripped fist.

“It concerns us as it pertains to Her Ladyship, the first Grand Saintess, as well. We will do everything we can to help,” said Lady Freesia, looking determined.

“Thank you very much,” I said, only for her expression to change to an expectant smile.

“So, can you tell us why all *three* became Grand Saintesses?”

“That’s...because I asked the first Grand Saintess to do it,” I answered.

The three Grand Saintesses each spoke up.

“Lady Chelsea told her that you had to cancel your holidays to restart the defensive devices when anything went wrong with them,” Lady Amaryllis said first.

“We also told her of our own experiences seeing you work tirelessly.” Then Lady Nemophila.

“Then, Her Ladyship said she’d make us all Grand Saintesses, and did it,” concluded Lady Mimosa.

Lady Nadeshiko was shocked into silence by their words.

“So we were finally able to tell her how rough the Grand Saintesses have had it up until now, huh...” said Lady Freesia, wiping tears from her eyes.

+ + +

Once we finished talking, we all returned to our respective manors. The Grand Saintesses’ debut at the capital’s sanctuary was after this, and my job as observer would apparently be finished by watching it from the closest seat.

“We’ll need to dress you up, Lady Chelsea.”

At my personal head maid Gina’s words, I was immediately brought to the bath and scrubbed clean. Then, I was dressed in a gown I’d brought from Chronowize, decorated with accessories, and given a light dusting of makeup.

“Perfect!” Martha said before putting me in a carriage.

Miss Micah, who was riding along with me, looked at me with tears in her eyes.

“I was so worried when you didn’t come back~!” she cried.

Thinking back, she hadn’t been outside of the Shrine of Trials. She had probably been waiting at the ready to make me a meal as soon as I came home.

“I’m sorry for worrying you. When everyone is together again, I’ll explain everything properly,” I said, putting it off for now, since the ride from the Flower Garden to the palace was so short.

“You’ve absolutely gotta~!” Miss Micah said, giving me a tight hug.

The holy capital’s palace didn’t have walls like a castle. It was a strange layout, where the border between it and the surrounding area was denoted by flower beds. It must have had a barrier with restrictions on entering, just like the Flower Garden.

Our carriage passed through the well-maintained gardens and stopped to let us off behind the sanctuary. Then, after following a female guide, I was brought to a waiting room. There I saw Lady Mimosa waving, having arrived first.

“You got here fast, Lady Chelsea,” she said, wearing a yellow gown different from the one she wore at our first meeting. The dress, made of thin layers of white and yellow fabrics that looked both soft and gorgeous, suited her. “I usually prefer wearing yellow anyway, so I didn’t have any trouble picking a dress. I wonder how the other two did?” she said in a relaxed tone.

The trio of Grand Saintesses had been named Red, Blue, and Yellow by Sakura. They were going to emphasize it at their debut, and have the citizens call them by their color as well. I had also received a Crest of the Grand Saintess, but as both it and my title had been hidden, the other three were the only ones who knew.

“I’m looking forward to seeing them,” I said, just as Lady Amaryllis entered the waiting room.

Wearing a bright red gown with a defined waist and a wide train, she sat down on a sofa and sighed. “Dresses are exhausting...”

Having been wearing a shirt and pants that were easy to move in up until yesterday—or rather, this morning—it seemed she wasn’t thrilled at being squeezed into a tight gown.

“I’m last, huh?” Lady Nemophila said as she appeared. She wore a bright blue mermaid gown, absolutely covered in silver-threaded embroidered flowers. She was so beautiful you just had to gasp in admiration.

“We’re all here,” I said, and all three nodded back.

“I actually passed a state guest from Chronowize on my way here,” Lady Amaryllis said, looking towards me.

“What kind of person were they?” I asked.

“He seemed quite similar to your fiancé.”

Apparently, she'd remembered how I'd described Lord Glen back at the tea party when we first met. Knowing he was so close, I couldn't help but fidget, unable to sit still.

"How long has it been since you last saw him?" Lady Mimosa asked, head tilted.

"About two months..."

The trip from Chronowize's capital to Celesark's Flower Garden had taken about a month, and the Floral Crucible itself had been a month as well. When I told them that, they all looked at each other.

"We've still got time until our debut, right?" Lady Nemophila asked the maid standing by the entrance to the waiting room.

"Yes," she replied with a nod.

"The guests from Chronowize are in a room for nobility three rooms past ours," Lady Amaryllis said with an elegant smile.

"Go on and see him!" Lady Mimosa urged, pointing to the door.

"Thank you so much. I'll see you later."

Encouraged by the three Grand Saintesses, I headed towards the guest room where Lord Glen was waiting, Miss Micah in tow. My heart was pounding as I walked through the hall and finally stood in front of the door. Just thinking about seeing Lord Glen for the first time in two months had my chest tightening painfully.

Taking a deep breath, I then knocked, and was immediately let inside.

"Excuse me," I said as I entered, only to see lots of people I knew...

Waiting by the door were my guard knights, who gave me a grin when our eyes met. On a three-seater sofa in the middle of the room sat Lord Glen, shocked to see me.

"It's been a long time, Lord Glen," I said as I approached the sofa and curtsied. Finally seeing him after months made me incredibly nervous.

"I'm shocked. I didn't think I'd be able to see you until the debut was finished," Lord Glen said, standing up and giving me a truly happy...and bewitching smile.

"Miss Chelsea, long time no see!"

I looked towards the source of the voice. On the three-seat sofa directly across from Lord Glen was Lord Tris, waving his hand.

"Huh? Lord Tris...?"

"What do you mean 'huh'? His Highness didn't tell you? There's a rule that a researcher from the Royal Research Institute has to accompany him on anything related to planting Spirit Tree cuttings," Lord Tris said, glancing over at Lord Glen, who looked off into the distance, feigning ignorance. "Wait, were you trying to surprise Miss Chelsea? Or did you just forget to tell her?"

He...probably forgot to tell me. He wouldn't be feigning ignorance if he was trying to surprise me... I stared at him, awaiting his response.

When Lord Glen noticed my gaze, he looked over at me. "I forgot..."

"I see," I replied with a giggle as he gave me a forced smile. "Um, where is Ele?"

I looked around the room, but the Spirit was nowhere to be seen.

"He's in my guest room in another building, waiting with the guards. Anyway..." Lord Glen said before moving over to me and giving me a tight hug.

He's hugging me in front of people?! As my face went bright red from embarrassment, his arms loosened and his face closed in on mine. Huh? Is he going to kiss me? I squeezed my eyes tightly closed, only for something to knock against my forehead. When I opened my eyes again, he was touching my forehead with his own. He'd done the same thing the day before I left, but I hadn't been *this* embarrassed back then!

As I froze in surprise, he whispered to me. "I was extremely worried that something had happened to you when you didn't contact me by telepathy on the night the Floral Crucible ended." The worry in his voice made me ashamed to have thought he was about to kiss me a moment earlier.

"Thank you so much for worrying about me..." I whispered back, managing to hide my bashfulness.

The Floral Crucible should have ended the day before, and I was supposed to talk to him telepathically in the evening, but we'd stayed an extra night to talk to Sakura. I remembered wanting to let him know that we'd be there another night, but I couldn't talk about anything going on inside the Flower Garden because of its barrier's effects. It was really aggravating, not being able to say what I wanted to say. I wanted to drink the Secret Seed and tell everyone about Sakura as soon as possible.

"Once the Grand Saintesses' debut is over, I'd like to discuss something with everyone in the guest room where Ele is. Can I have everyone gather there?" I said, holding down my beating heart.

Lord Glen gave me a serious look. "Everyone in the guest room with Ele, huh... Something is up?"

I nodded in response. He opened and closed his mouth as if he wanted to say something, but just let out a little sigh. In the end, he stayed silent, giving me another tight hug.

After we hugged for a bit, I heard someone clear their throat. When my head spun to look at the sofa in realization, my eyes met Lord Tris's, who was smiling at us.

"I'll be going back now!" I cried in a panic, giving him a little

bow before heading back to our waiting room.

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When I returned to the waiting room, all three Grand Saintesses were grinning at me. Lady Nemophila looked like she was holding back laughter.

“So, did you meet with your fiancé?” Lady Mimosa asked.

“Your happiness at seeing him is written all over your face,” said Lady Amaryllis before I could even give a response.

I quickly covered my face with both hands. I hadn’t realized it, but apparently, I had a huge smile on my face. *I need to do something about this smile, quick! The Grand Saintesses’ debut is soon...!*

“You’re fine like that. You need to be smiling at our big moment,” Lady Nemophila said, smiling brightly.

When the time came, I followed the three Grand Saintesses from the waiting room to the balcony. I could see that tons of people had come to see the Grand Saintess from our spot on the third floor.

As I stood there surprised at the number, I heard the former Grand Saintess, Lady Freesia’s voice coming from a square board enchanted with voice-amplifying magic off to the side of the plaza.

“From this generation on, three Grand Saintesses will be chosen. Allow me to introduce them.”

The crowd buzzed at the word “three,” but Lady Freesia ignored it and continued.

“The Grand Saintess of Red, Amaryllis. The Grand Saintess of Blue, Nemophila. The Grand Saintess of Yellow, Mimosa.”

Having had their names announced, the three Grand Saintesses made a fist with their left hands and touched it to the right side of their chest, showing the crest on the back of their hands. The crowd went wild when they saw the three colored flowers.

“Should we wave, since it’s such a special occasion?”

“Great idea.”

“Yeah, let’s wave.”

Lady Amaryllis and Lady Nemophila agreed with Lady Mimosa’s suggestion and waved with their right hands. When they did, the crowd cheered even louder, waving back at them.

I watched all this from the side of the balcony. My role as observer of the Floral Crucible was finally finished!

I sighed in relief, then the trio of Grand Saintesses nodded to each other before pulling me to the center of the balcony.

“This is Lady Chelsea Sargent, our observer who came to us from the Kingdom of Chronowize.”

“It’s thanks to her that the three of us all became Grand

Saintesses. We're incredibly thankful."

"Please, give her a big round of applause too!" the three of them shouted in unison as they clapped.

Seeing this, lots of other people began clapping too.

"C'mon, smile, smile!"

Urged on by Lady Mimosa, I smiled at the crowd, face bright red.

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Once their debut was over, the celebratory party began. Packing the palace's hall were guests invited from other countries, the politicians who ran the government, the former Grand Saintesses and their aides, and the three new Grand Saintesses' families.

As thanks for acting as the observer, the three Grand Saintesses gave me the title of "Friend of the Grand Saintesses" and a sheathed paper knife. The title would allow me to freely come and go from the Holy Country of Celesark, and would let me enter the holy capital without the card-shaped passport magic tool. They told me that it was only given to observers who were able to become close friends with the Grand Saintesses. Hearing this, I was so happy I could have jumped for joy.

"We'll welcome you anytime," Lady Amaryllis said with a laugh.

"But you can't come here easily, now can you? That's why we plan to send lots of letters."

"Hence the paper knife we gave you."

I nodded in understanding, getting a nod back from Lady Nemophila.

"That paper knife is a bit of a magic tool itself, so try it out later!" Lady Mimosa said, smiling mischievously.

I wonder what kind of tool it is? I wanted to try it out as soon as I could.

Happily accepting their gift, I replied, "Thank you. I'll treasure it."

After that, Lady Freesia, the former Grand Saintess, spoke to me.

"Thank you so much for taking on the role of observer. We were able to learn a lot thanks to you."

A lot? Did she mean about inside the Shrine of Trials?

"I also very much appreciate the fact that three Grand Saintesses will be chosen now. I'm so glad that they won't suffer like I did during my time!" Lady Freesia continued, voice shaking. I remembered how she'd talked about how hard it was being the only one during our first meeting.

"I'm glad to have helped," I answered. As I did, Lady Nadeshiko swooped in and handed Lady Freesia a handkerchief, and the former Grand Saintess immediately used it to wipe away her tears.

"I'm also glad, since I had always watched Lady Freesia endure it

all. Thank you so much, Lady Chelsea,” Lady Nadeshiko said, bowing her head before leaving with Lady Freesia.

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Once the celebratory party was over, I visited the guest room where Ele was waiting. Apparently, it was the room that Lord Glen was staying in, and very large. Inside were Lord Glen and Lord Tris, Ele in his cat form, Gina, Martha, Miss Micah, and my guard knights... Lots of people were present.

“I’m sorry for making you all wait,” I said, only for Ele to jump up from his position on top of the box with the Spirit Tree cutting.

«Sakura?» he murmured before shaking his head.

Though you couldn’t see it, on the back of my hand was the Crest of the Grand Saintess that Sakura had given me. That crest was connected to Sakura, and her mana flowed into me. Ele might have noticed that.

I sat down beside Lord Glen, smiling bitterly.

“Can we get right to the point?” he asked, and I nodded. He then cast a number of spells on the room. “No one but the people in the room will be able to hear us. So, what did you want to talk about?”

I willed the Secret Seed: Room of Selection Edition back from my storage room in the Spirit World through the Spirit Tree bracelet on my left wrist. Root the Communication Spirit popped out at the same time.

«I’m gonna listen too,» he said, lightly floating to sit on the top of my head.

“I’ll tell you all after I drink this,” I said, showing Lord Glen the seed.

He immediately stared at it.

“I just appraised it, but... It’s called the ‘Secret Seed: Room of Selection Edition,’ and only one can exist in the world at a time. You’d need to destroy the first one to create a second. Its effect is allowing you to speak of the events that happened in the Flower Garden’s Room of Selection. It lasts for two hours after drinking, and only works on the Spirit King Element’s contractor. It tastes like the first Grand Saintess’s favorite apple juice,” he read off, holding his head in shock.

“Huh? But I thought you couldn’t talk about anything that happened in the Flower Garden outside of it?” Lord Tris wondered.

“It’s okay, I can with this.”

Since I couldn’t explain in detail, I could only say that.

“I’m going to drink it,” I announced, downing it before everyone’s eyes. The pleasantly sweet flavor was the most delicious apple juice I’d ever tried! I was surprised that it was yummy enough for me to

wish I had more to drink. *I should be able to talk now*, I thought to myself as I took a deep breath. “Now I can talk about what happened in the Room of Selection! I spoke to Sakura, the first Grand Saintess and the Proxy, through a mirror,” I said proudly.

Everyone in the room froze.

“Huh? What?” Lord Glen asked, a stiff smile on his face.

“Inside the Room of Selection was a huge mirror, and when we called the first Grand Saintess’s name, we were able to speak to her through the mirror. Normally, I would have had to recommend who to choose as Grand Saintess, and they’d receive the Crest of the Grand Saintess, but when I asked if she was the Proxy, we ended up talking about a lot of things...”

I then explained how “The Proxy” and “The Proxy, Driven by Envy” were two different people.

“So, she’s usually asleep, aside from waking once every ten years to choose the Grand Saintess...” Lord Glen murmured.

I nodded. “Sakura was very angry, saying, ‘Just thinking that *someone* is messing around while I sleep... How infuriating!’” I recited what she’d said.

Ele’s jaw dropped. «That does sound exactly like Sakura when she’s mad...» he muttered.

Next, I told them all about how Sakura was immortal and ageless, and that she’d been wheedled into burning down the Spirit Tree by some strange man.

«The man who influenced her... It must have been the man who could be reborn again and again...»

Lord Glen jumped slightly in reaction to Ele’s words. “What do you mean, ‘could be reborn again and again’?”

«Exactly that. He had boasted about how he would be reborn again immediately after dying, keeping his former lives’ memories, knowledge, and skills.»

“Would he continue being reborn, even now?”

«Most likely...»

When I repeated Ele’s words for everyone else, Lord Tris scowled. “He’s the one targeting Miss Chelsea?”

“I don’t know why he would be targeting Chelsea... But we’d better be safe than sorry,” Lord Glen said, for now, as we started on the next topic.

“Sakura wants us to summon the Great Spirits to get rid of the barrier, so she can revise Celesark’s defensive devices and punish the bad guys,” I said.

“What do you mean, ‘revise Celesark’s defensive devices’?” Lord Tris asked.

“Celesark’s Grand Saintesses manage the defensive devices all

around the country, but every time they acted up, the Grand Saintesses would have to cancel their days off and go see to them...”

“No days off? Sounds like a black company...” Lord Glen grumbled.

“Ah! Sakura said the same thing! What does that mean?” I asked.

Lord Glen blinked at me a few times before replying. “It means something like they don’t get to rest and end up sick... What else did you talk about?”

“I think I said everything I needed to tell you... Aside from that, we ended up staying an extra night to chat more with Sakura. I couldn’t use my telepathy that night, and we ended up coming back the next morning instead. I’m sorry for worrying you...” I apologized.

I recalled how I’d worried my guard knights and maids by spending an unplanned extra night in the Shrine of Trials, and how I hadn’t contacted Lord Glen with my telepathy that night and had worried him.

“So that was why you came back the morning after.”

“You were discussing important things, so you had no choice.”

“You came back safe, Chelsea, that’s all that matters~!”

Martha, Gina, and Miss Micah all spoke, smiling.

“Other than that... Ah, I was given the Crest of the Grand Saintess as well.”

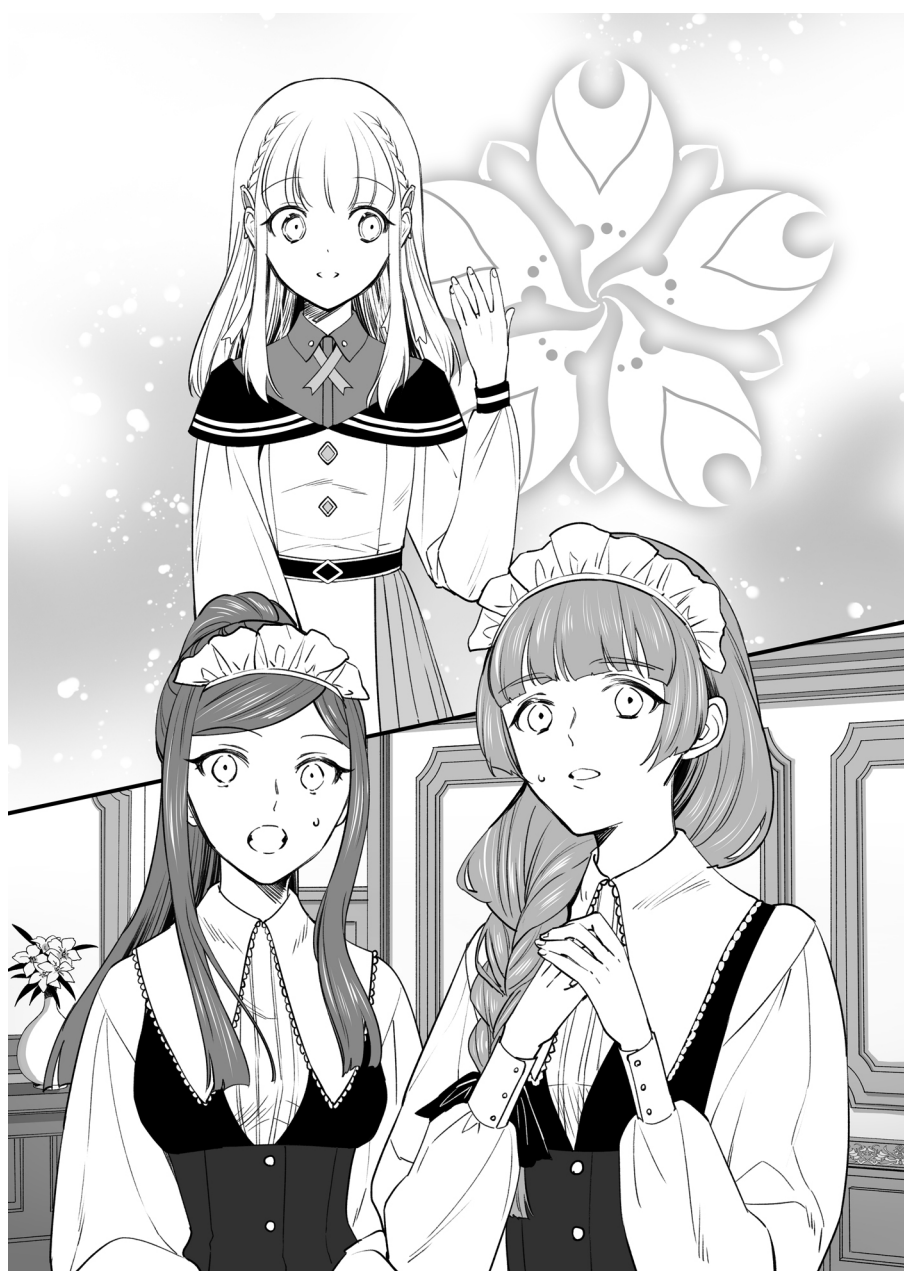
“Huh?!” Everyone exclaimed in surprise.

“The crest also has the effect of protecting the Grand Saintess. She gave it to me just to be safe, since I’m being targeted by the fake Proxy.”

«And that’s why I could feel Sakura’s mana...» Ele said, nodding along in understanding.

“But Sakura said she hid both the crest and the title, so I don’t think you could tell if I didn’t say anything,” I said, lifting my blank left hand to show everyone.

“So Lady Chelsea is the hidden fourth Grand Saintess...” Martha murmured, eyes wide. Gina was dumbfounded.



Lord Glen stared above my head for a longer moment than usual before sighing.

“When I appraised you normally, it didn’t say anything about you being a Grand Saintess. But when I appraised you in detail, ‘The Grand Saintess of Cherry Blossoms (Hidden)’ was in your list of titles. The effect is receiving mana from the first Grand Saintess and knowing each other’s locations. It also says ‘Come see me’...”

I wasn’t surprised, since I’d already known that Lord Glen’s Sage-level [Appraisal] Skill would probably let him see what was hidden.

«Oh! Lady Chelsea is a savior, and a Saintess, and a Grand Saintess... Anyway, she’s super amazing, huh!» Root said from atop my head.

“Yep. She’s a Saintess in both name and in reality.”

Now that I remembered, I’d been given the alias of “The Saintess of Abundance” back in the Martec Republic.

“And after that, I became friends with Sakura, and she told me to tell Ele to hurry up and plant the cuttings,” I said, finishing up.

“We’d been talking about leaving the day after tomorrow to let you rest a day after the Floral Crucible was finished, but we can’t say that now, huh?”

“That’s right. Let’s get going tomorrow morning!” Lord Tris said, nodding in agreement with Lord Glen’s words.

And so, it was decided we’d go to plant the cutting tomorrow, right after waking up.

10. The Third Great Spirit

The next morning, we headed towards the spot the Holy Country of Celesark had prepared for us to plant the Spirit Tree cutting. After less than half a day in a swaying carriage, we arrived at a grassy plain to the east of the capital. Just a short distance from the center of the plain was a large manor.

“They’d like for us to plant it close enough to that building to be seen,” said Lord Glen as he looked at the map. Then, about ten people walked out of the manor and started waving their arms at us.

“Looks like they’re calling for us. Are we gonna go?” Lord Tris asked.

I nodded at his question, and we headed over to where the waving people were. From the small wing-like remnants on their backs, it seemed like they were all Winged Ones.

“You all must be from Chronowize. I have been assigned to manage this location, while the others will handle security,” said the Winged man, making a fist with his left hand and thumping it on the right side of his chest. Once he’d done that, all of the Winged guards followed suit.

When I thumped my fist on my chest in response, they all smiled. In the past month, I had been using the Celesark greeting more than a curtsy, so it felt natural at this point.

“We’re planning on planting the cutting now, and considering the future, we’d like for the guards to observe. Is that acceptable?” Lord Glen asked with a serious expression. The manager nodded.

“Absolutely. In fact, we’d be delighted, since we hadn’t thought we would be allowed to attend,” he said, smiling happily.

One of the guards rushed back inside of the manor to call for the guards who were on their break.

“Now that everyone’s here, let’s start,” Lord Glen said.

I nodded at his words, then I took the wooden box from one of the guard knights. Ele, who had been on top of said box, walked up my arm to rest on my shoulders. Opening the container, I saw the sparkling, glass-like Spirit Tree branch. As I picked it up, I willed for the box to be put in my Spirit storage through my bracelet.

“I’ll be planting it now,” I announced before using both of my hands to stab the glass rod-like Spirit Tree branch into the ground.

Just as I did, the branch sparkled so brightly that I had to close

my eyes. The light eventually subsided and I opened my eyes again to see the rod-like cutting branch growing. I stepped back a few steps and looked up as it grew to about the height of the Royal Research Institute's second floor.

"It grew just fine..." I murmured as I looked at the sparkling Spirit Tree, and Ele nodded from his spot on my shoulders.

The last cutting we planted had stopped growing partway through due to the land's mana drought... While I was thinking that, something started descending from above. *It has to be the Great Spirit!* Before I knew it, whatever it was came down at an amazing speed, crashing into the ground.

Should I have caught that? I wondered, looking at Ele on my shoulders.

«Don't worry.»

The people around us were shocked into silence as the blue, semi-transparent thing that crashed into the ground transformed into a humanoid figure.

"Hello, hi! I'm Halnark, the Spirit of Water. Call me Hal!" said the Spirit.

Smiling brightly just like Lord Tris, the Spirit of Water Halnark took the form of a little girl who only came up to about my stomach. Her aqua-colored hair was tied up into pigtails with big light purple ribbons, and she wore a hooded shirt and overalls that poofed out like pumpkins. *I think this is the first time I've seen a Spirit look like a small girl.*

Just as I was about to bend down to speak to her, she cried out in realization before floating up in front of my eyes. "Sorry. Forgot to float!"

Seeing her smile and giggle was so adorable that I just wanted to squeeze her!

«You're as small as ever,» Ele commented, still in cat form.

Hal smiled brightly back. "You're still teeny and adorable as a kitty, King Ele."

Ele huffed, transforming back into his Spirit form. "Is this acceptable?"

"Yep! You're cool when you're all big," Hal answered, still smiling.

"Come now, get to choosing a contractor."

"Ah, right! Who should I pick?" Hal looked around at everyone after Ele urged her on. Floating over to Lord Tris, she snapped her fingers and said, "I pick this guy!"

"Wha?" The moment Lord Tris's expression changed to confusion, all the sound stopped. Ele, Lord Tris, and I were the only ones still moving. "Huh? What? What's going on?"

Despite how shocked Lord Tris was, Hal and Ele didn't give him any explanations.

"Time stops when a Spirit is making a contract with you," I explained as I walked up beside him.

His jaw just dropped. "Wait...she's contracting to *me*?!"

"Yep! You smell the most water-y out of everyone here!"

"What does she mean by water-y?" I wondered, only for Ele to explain.

"Tris has the [Water Magic] Skill. That is what Halnark is talking about."

"Yeah, that!" Hal said, smiling brightly and nodding.

"It just came to mind a minute ago, but she smiles just like my little sister..." Lord Tris murmured, scratching at his face.

If Hal and Lord Tris were standing next to each other smiling, you could mistake them for siblings. As I thought that, Hal lifted one of her hands.

"Kay, gimme your hand."

Lord Tris followed her instructions, holding out his right hand.

"I am Halnark, the Spirit of Water. I now contract to you," the Spirit recited, poking at Lord Tris's right pinky finger, which turned a light aqua. "Our contract is made."

After she finished talking, she snapped her fingers again and seemingly melted into the Spirit Tree. The sound returned, and I felt the people around us moving again.

Looking down at his right pinky, Lord Tris murmured, "I've made a contract with a Spirit..."

I smiled up at him, and I heard Lord Glen cry out in surprise behind us.

"When did Chelsea move?!"

I'd been standing beside the tree when Hal appeared, but the next instant, I was standing in front of Lord Tris. It was only natural that Lord Glen would be shocked.

"When Spirits make contracts, time stops for everyone but the Spirit, the person they are contracting with, and any other people contracted to a Spirit."

"So you mean..."

"Lord Tris has contracted with the Spirit of Water," I confirmed, only for Lord Glen to touch a hand to his chin as he fell into thought. *Is something wrong?*

"Call her name and bring her back," Ele instructed Lord Tris as I tilted my head in confusion.

Lord Tris looked up. "Uh, Spirit of Water, Miss Hal, are you here?"

«Yep, I am, Lord Tris!»

An aqua-colored snake dropped down from above.

“A snake?” I wondered, only for the snake—who was shorter than my arm and just as thick as my thumb—to open its mouth and flick its tongue.

«Yep! My temporary form is a snake!»

“Snakes eat the mice who mess with crops, so that’s super great,” Lord Tris said, holding out his hand to the snake-formed Spirit. Hal slithered up his arm and onto his shoulder.

As I watched, Lord Glen spoke up from behind me, calling Ele’s name.

“Hey, Ele... Can you just confirm something for me?”

“Of course,” Ele said, floating over to him with his arms crossed, still in Spirit form.

“Can Spirits live separately from their contractor?”

Ele shook his head at the question. “As King of the Spirits, I am able to, but other Spirits...they would be unable to exist in this world for more than a few days when separated from their contractor.”

“Then how about Spirits who live away from the Spirit Tree they came from?”

Having seemingly realized something, Ele looked shocked before heaving a sigh. “They cannot leave their tree for long until the cutting fully grows.”

When he said that, I realized what the issue was. Since the Spirit of Water Hal had to stay with her tree, which I had just planted from a cutting...she couldn’t leave Celesark. But she had just made a contract with Lord Tris, who needed to return to Chronowize. And if they could only be separated for a few days...

“So Lord Tris can’t return to Chronowize?” I asked, only for Ele and Lord Glen to nod.

“That’s bad!” Lord Tris screeched, near tears.

No matter what, Hal wouldn’t be able to leave Celesark until the tree was fully grown.

“Halnark can only leave for a few hours at most,” said Ele as Lord Tris’s shoulders drooped.

Seeing him like that, everyone there began trying to think of a solution out of pity.

“Er, can the contractor not stay here forever?” the manager asked.

Lord Tris shook his head. “I’d asked for someone to water the plants while I was away, but I’m worried about the research fields...”

“But Her Spiritness can’t live separately from you, can she?” asked a female guard.

Hal transformed back to her humanoid Spirit form from her snake form. She was now sitting on Lord Tris’s shoulders.

“I don’t wanna leave my contractor!” she said, hugging his head tight. She was adorable.

So, Lord Tris has no choice but to stay here and endure it..

Just as I was thinking that, Miss Micah spoke up. “Why not just have him go through the Spirit Tree~?”

Lord Glen smacked his fist on top of his palm while Ele’s jaw dropped.

“That *works!*” the two of them exclaimed in unison.

In the end, it was decided that Lord Tris would live in the manor near Celesark’s Spirit Tree until it was fully grown, and commute through the Spirit Trees to Chronowize on his work days. As soon as that was decided, the manor’s manager began getting permission for him to stay.

“This is just another part of managing the Spirit Tree!” he had said, looking quite reliable.

After that, thanks to the backing of the three new Grand Saintesses, Lord Tris was given permission to stay.

Epilogue

Having safely(?) finished planting the Spirit Tree cutting, we were ready to leave the holy capital. I had sent word to the three Grand Saintesses in the palace, only for them to send a message asking me to stay just one more day to talk more, just like Sakura had.

“In return for staying an extra day, I’d like for you all to grant me a wish. Can we have tea inside the Flower Garden, where we can speak about everything?” I had replied, giggling, and they allowed it immediately.

Inside the Flower Garden, in the Central Manor’s south greenhouse, the four of us gathered. We sat in the same places that we had when we’d had our first introductory tea party, with Lady Amaryllis in the East, Lady Nemophila in the West, Lady Mimosa in the South, and I in the North.

“I wonder why it feels so nostalgic for us all to sit in these specific places?” Lady Amaryllis asked.

“Back then, I’d thought just one of us would become Grand Saintess. I never dreamed that something like this would happen,” Lady Nemophila replied.

“I hadn’t thought I’d be falling into any holes, or that we’d get along with the golems,” Lady Mimosa added.

A smile came to my face naturally as I heard them all reminisce.

“Though it was only for a single month, everything was so fun... I’ll never experience something like that again,” I said earnestly, only for Lady Amaryllis to frown.

“When you put it that way, you’re going to make us all sad...”

I was leaving the holy capital tomorrow. Knowing this, the three Grand Saintesses’ words stuck in their throats.

“Yes... And since there are only the four of us and our guards here, I’ll tell you all something I was keeping a secret,” I said, trying to cheer them up.

“A secret... I wanna know!” Lady Mimosa cried, leaning in towards me. The other two looked at each other, then they both followed Lady Mimosa’s example.

“To tell you the truth... I don’t have a spatial storage magic tool.”

“Huh?” they all cried out in surprise.

“But you were pulling out tons of food back in the Shrine of Trials, weren’t you?” asked Lady Nemophila, thinking back to the

sandwiches, baked treats, and other foods I'd brought.

I nodded.

"Was it...an Item Box?" Lady Amaryllis asked in a whisper.

I shook my head. Since I had been told to refrain from using my Skills within the Shrine of Trials, even if I had an Item Box, using it would have caused problems. That was why I made sure to shut down that guess immediately.

"As I spoke about in the Room of Selection, I'm contracted to a Spirit... Using this bracelet, I can have the Spirits hold things for me," I explained quietly as Lady Amaryllis covered her mouth in shock, Lady Nemophila's eyes widened, and Lady Mimosa's jaw dropped.

They were all so shocked that they couldn't speak.

"Root, can you come out?" I asked, looking down at my Spirit Tree bracelet. Root, the Communication Spirit, popped out.

«What's up, Lady Chelsea?» he asked, floating to eye level and tilting his head.

"I'd like to introduce you to my beloved friends. Is that okay?"

«Of course!» he responded, turning around to face them. The Grand Saintess trio stared at him.

"This is the second Spirit I'm contracted to, Root the Communication Spirit." I probably should have introduced Ele as the King of Spirits first, but since he was currently at Celesark's Spirit Tree, I called Root from the Spirit World instead.

«I'm Root. Nice to meet you!» the little Spirit introduced himself, despite knowing they couldn't actually hear him. Then, he flew around in front of them. It was adorable to watch his little butterfly-like wings flap.

"I am shocked... We are seeing a real *Spirit*!" Lady Amaryllis gushed, keeping her voice low.

Lady Mimosa seemed to realize something. "Hey...this Spirit... He's a boy, isn't he?"

Root nodded in response to her question.

"How is a boy inside the Flower Garden...?" Lady Mimosa and Lady Amaryllis were wondering the same thing I'd been.

"I don't know how..." I answered, shoulders drooping.

"Barriers are an ancient magic and were known as daily life spells way back," Lady Nemophila said seriously before looking at Root. "The Flower Garden's barrier works by judging everyone who touches it. But if he comes inside of the Flower Garden directly through Lady Chelsea's bracelet, then that lets him in despite his gender."

Now that I thought about it, I remembered that Lady Nemophila worked at a laboratory researching magic.

"In, um, simpler words?" Lady Mimosa asked, tilting her head as she didn't understand.

Lady Nemophila's eyebrows twitched before she answered. "Though you can't get into somewhere surrounded by high walls normally, you'd be able to get in by digging underneath it. It's like that."

Finally understanding, Lady Mimosa murmured "Oh, I get it!" to herself. I understood it that way too...

"Now, this is the important part," I began as I pulled myself together, leaning in and signaling for them all to do the same. Taking care not to bump into Root, the trio leaned in towards me. "When you're contracted to a Spirit, it allows you to travel in between Spirit Trees."

They all tilted their heads, confused.

"Um... Basically, it means I can easily travel between Chronowize's capital and the Spirit Tree near the holy capital," I said.

"Huuuuuhhhh?!"

"...Bwuh?"

"Oooh!"

When the three Grand Saintesses all cried out, the guards who'd been waiting to the side of the greenhouse all stepped closer, worried.

"We are fine!" Lady Amaryllis rushed to say, sending the guards back to their original positions.

After the Grand Saintesses each looked at each other, they then spoke up.

"So we can meet whenever we would like?"

"That sounds right."

"So we can have tea parties as often as we want?!"

The three all turned their heads towards me at once.

"Um, so... I was really happy when you gave me that title," I said.

The trio started gripping their fists, looking up to the sky, putting their hands to their cheeks... All making weird gestures as they processed their glee.

After that, we decided the process we would follow when we wanted to have a tea party in Celesark, and the time just flew by until the end of our tea party.

"We all have work tomorrow..."

"We won't be able to see you off, but take care!"

"Let us know as soon as you get back! Then we can have tea again!"

And with that, the Grand Saintess Trio left the Flower Garden.

+ + +

The morning we were to leave the holy capital, Lord Tris and Hal in her Spirit form came to see us off. I touched Lord Tris and used my telepathy so that we could communicate while we were separated.

“You’ve gotta tell me as soon as you get back!” Lord Tris said.

Once we returned to Chronowize, he would begin commuting to the Royal Research Institute through the Spirit Trees.

“Lady Chelsea, make sure to come play!” Hal said from her spot on Lord Tris’s shoulders, smiling brightly.

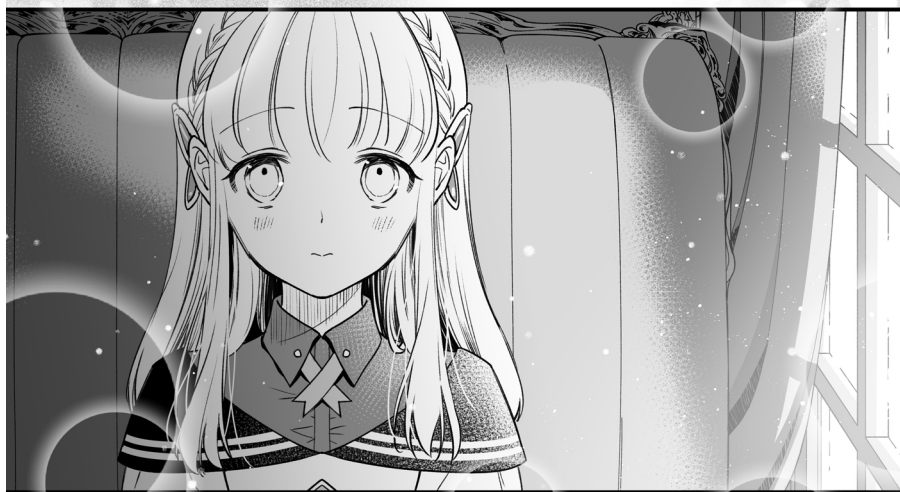
As I waved goodbye, our carriage began moving. My maids had all tactfully let Lord Glen and I ride alone on the way back.

How long has it been since it was just the two of us alone, without even Ele in his cat form...? It had to be back on the day before I left Chronowize, when Lord Glen had visited my room in the Royal Research Institute’s lodging house. The maids had tactfully left us alone back then too.

Now...what should we talk about? Though I’d been able to speak to him fine back with everyone else present, the moment we were alone together, my words caught in my throat.

While I was worrying to myself, Lord Glen smiled at me from where he sat opposite me in the carriage. “It’s been a while since we were alone together.”

“Yes...it has been,” I responded nervously, only for his smile to deepen.



“Honestly, not being able to see you for two whole months was so hard...”

“I thought so too... The month it took to arrive in Celesark’s capital felt so long,” I answered truthfully.

Lord Glen chuckled. “So it wasn’t bad once you got to the Flower Garden?”

“Uuurgh... No. I was so busy, it, um... It just flew by.”

From the day after meeting the three then-Grand Saintess candidates, we had “hands-on learning” like battle training and practice camping, and then all of the surprises we got inside of the Shrine of Trials. Thinking back, I had a very busy—or rather—a *rich* time. But since I couldn’t talk about anything that’d happened inside of the Flower Garden while outside of it, I gave him a strained smile and a very loose explanation.

“Are you less nervous now?” Lord Glen asked, standing and sitting down again beside me.

I then realized I’d been talking to him just like I always had.

“It seems so,” I answered in relief, only for him to give me a shy look.

“I’ve been thinking this ever since I saw you in that guest room...but you seem like you’re even more dazzling than you were before,” he said. I tilted my head in confusion, not understanding what he meant, and he looked down and covered his mouth with a hand. “You really are adorable...”

Hearing his whispered words loud and clear, my face heated up. When I looked closely back at him, I noticed his ears were bright red. *Is he...trying to hide his embarrassment?* As I thought that, my feelings of affection for him grew stronger.

“You’re... You’re adorable too...”

When I said that, he glanced at me, still hiding his mouth behind his hand. “I’d prefer...for you to think of me as cool...”

“I only think you’re adorable sometimes.”

“And the rest of the time...?”

“I think...you’re beautiful...”

From the first time I met him, I’d always thought his face was as beautiful as an angel’s. When I answered that way, his shoulders slumped. *Was my response strange...?* I wondered, only for him to look at me with upturned eyes.

“Just what do I need to do to make you look at me like a man...?” he asked, lifting a lock of my hair to his lips.

The second he lifted my hair, I remembered how worried I had been, thinking that my feelings for him were one-sided. But seeing how he was acting now, I realized how needless my fears were. He

might have been even more worried about that than I was.

It was then I realized something else. *I've never once actually told him how I felt about him!*

While I was busy being stunned by my own thoughts, Lord Glen pulled away and heaved a little sigh.

"I know it's just a bother for you, me saying that all of a sudden... I know you treat me like a member of your family, or a friend, so I'll just wait patiently for you," he said, smiling gently.

"W-Wait—"

"Yeah, I'll wait."

"No, I-I didn't mean it like that...!" I stammered. *What should I say in this situation?!*

I grabbed his arm with both of my hands. He seemed surprised, giving me a blank look back.

"Um, I... I've never thought of you as family, or as a friend," I said, trying to fix the misunderstanding.

Lord Glen avoided my gaze. "So...just as a political fiancé?"

"No...!"

If I didn't say it in actual words, he'd never get it. I took a deep breath, then looked straight at him.

"I adore you," I confessed, face heating up.

Lord Glen froze, looking at me as if he was looking at something strange. "Since when...?"

"Since before we got engaged," I answered.

He sighed deeply, holding his head and looking down. "So it's always been mutual..."

"I thought I'd told you... I, um... I always thought it was mutual..." I murmured. *To think we could be so out of sync...*

After that, we discussed why the two of us hadn't realized it. Apparently, since my response when he proposed was just "Yes," he'd always thought his feelings were one-sided. And other than the times he'd escorted me anywhere, I'd never initiated physical contact.

Really? I can't remember if I did or not...

"We might have been engaged, but I was holding back, thinking you wouldn't want someone you didn't like to be pursuing you like that... But I won't hold back any longer, okay?" he said, giving me an enchanting smile.

"O-Okay..." I said, nodding. *What would Lord Glen be like if he wasn't holding anything back?*

As my heart pounded, he hugged me tightly and whispered, "I won't do anything too sudden. Don't worry."

Hearing his words echo directly in my ear was embarrassing. But after saying that, he loosened his arms.

And so we stayed like that, chatting about nothing in particular until I remembered something I had wanted to ask him.

“Um, Lord Glen,” I started, as he gave me another enchanting smile.

“What, Chelsea?” he responded in a sickly-sweet voice, tilting his head.

“There was something I wanted to ask you...” I said, heart still pounding as he gave me a questioning look. “Are you...a Reincarnator?”

Lord Glen’s eyes widened in shock at my question.

“Did the Proxy tell you that?” he asked back, a strained smile on his face.

“She didn’t say it specifically. I just kept it in mind to ask you later...” I said, lowering my head.

In the Room of Selection, Sakura had said that “the king’s little brother and the emperor are both Reincarnators,” but she hadn’t actually said Lord Glen’s name. It might have been thanks to her words that I was able to ask if it was true while outside of the Flower Garden’s barrier.

I looked up at him again, and he gave me a resigned smile. “Yeah, I’m a Reincarnator. I have memories of my past life, and I use them in my life now.”

Hearing this, I thought about how he must have had memories of the same world as Sakura, and I felt a little pain in my chest.

“Do you hate me now that you know I’m a Reincarnator, Chelsea?” he asked, looking slightly miserable.

“No, I don’t. I just wanted to be sure,” I answered truthfully, only for him to look relieved.

“You really can’t lie, can you?” Lord Glen said, giving me another tight hug. “Chronowize has had several Reincarnators born into the royal family over the years. They’ve all had their names go down in history, but there was one who had the people around them learn they were a Reincarnator, and their lover jilted them because of it... For a moment, I was worried you were going to abandon me too.”

It was the first time I’d ever seen him this timid.

“You might abandon me someday, but the opposite is completely impossible,” I said plainly.

Lord Glen’s arms loosened. Looking at me curiously with wide eyes, he said, “I never thought I’d hear you declare something that flatly. It seems you’ve grown really strong in the two months we were separated.”

Seeing him like that was just too funny, and I laughed.

Side Story: Tris and Hal's First Day of Work

It was the day after Chelsea and friends had returned to Chronowize's capital. After getting word that they'd returned safely, it was decided that Tris would go into work at the Royal Research Institute with his contracted Spirit, Hal the Spirit of Water at his side.

Carrying the child-like Hal on his shoulders, Tris went through the Holy Country of Celesark's Spirit tree to the second Spirit Tree of Origin in Chronowize. As soon as he stepped out of the second Spirit Tree of Origin, the Royal Research Institute was right before his eyes.

"It seems Miss Chelsea's got today off, so we'll go greet the chief first."

"Okaaaaay!" Hal replied to Tris, raising a fist in the air from on his shoulders. She was so cute that they might have been mistaken for a father and daughter by an onlooker.

Still carrying Hal on his shoulders, Tris headed to the Research Institute's entrance. Once they were inside, Tris showed the receptionist his identification.

"Huh? U-Uh...go on in," the receptionist said, looking baffled as she let them inside.

Tris gave the woman a bright smile before walking through the Institute's halls. Every other researcher or guard knight they passed looked at them in shock, bewilderment, and sometimes even suspicion, but Lord Tris kept going, taking nothing to heart.

Once they arrived in front of the Royal Research Institute Chief's office, Tris knocked before stepping inside.

"Long time no see, Chief!" he greeted her with a bright smile.

Looking dubious, the chief looked at Hal on his shoulders.

Noticing her poor reaction, Tris tilted his head in confusion.

"Huh? Didn't His Highness tell you all about everything?"

"Well, His Highness told me that you'd made a contract with a Spirit and would be commuting from Celesark from now on. But he didn't say anything about you having a kid."

"What're you talking about?"

"Is the girl on your shoulders your kid?"

"No, she's the *Spirit*," Tris replied, taking Hal down from his shoulders.

Giving a smile that was identical to Tris's, Hal stood in front of the

Chief and said, "I'm Hal, the Spirit of Water. I'm contracted to Lord Tris. Nice to meet you!"

Being greeted by a little pigtailed girl who was as beautiful as a Spirit, even the Chief, who usually sported nothing but a daring smile, couldn't help but melt.

"What a good girl, being so good at greeting someone already!" Being both a marquise and the mother of a three-year-old, the chief smiled, speaking gently. Then, she walked over to Tris and whispered, "What are *you* making this cute little girl say? Where are her parents? Don't tell me she's your illegitimate child?"

"No, seriously, she's a Spirit. She introduced herself, didn't she?"

"No matter how you look at her, she's just a little human girl!"

It seemed that Hal's young physical age made it impossible for the chief to see her as a Spirit.

"How can I convince you... Ah, Miss Hal! Try floating!"

"Kay!" Hal nodded, floating up into the air and drifting between Tris and the chief.

"I, wha...?!" the chief cried in shock, unable to form proper words.

"Do you get it now?"

"If she didn't, should I spray her with water?" Hal said in amusement, still floating up and down.

"I just couldn't see you as anything but a child... I apologize." Having finally recognized her as a Spirit, the Chief switched to a politer tone. "May I call you Lady Hal?"

"Yep. I'll be coming here with Lord Tris all the time from now on, so nice to meet you!" Hal said with a bright smile, getting back onto Tris's shoulders.

Next, Tris and Hal used the Royal Research Institute's Teleportation Circle to head outside of the capital.

"This is the field where I plant all of Miss Chelsea's seeds."

"Lady Chelsea's seeds?" Hal parroted, tilting her head in confusion since she didn't know about Chelsea's [Seed Creation] Skill.

"Miss Chelsea can make any seed she wishes for with her Skill. We mainly plant her edible seeds in this field," Tris explained, getting a starry-eyed look back from Hal.

The field where Chelsea's created seeds were planted outside of the capital was completely covered with weeds.

"I was afraid of this, since I only asked for people to water them all..." Tris said with a sigh as he looked at the field that had gone untamed for two entire months.

He then used his [Earth Magic] Skill to knock only the weeds out of the dirt. Once he was finished "weeding," this time he used his [Water Magic] Skill on the whole field to water it.

"That's today's job done." Once he took a breather, Hal hugged

his head tight.

“Lord Tris, you’re so delicate using your Skills. It’s so interesting!” she murmured, praising him.

Though she looked like a little girl, she had lived just as long as Irene the Spirit of Fire and Gloucester the Spirit of Earth. Knowing that, Tris smiled brightly at her compliment.

“That really makes me happy. You’re about the only one who’d ever say that to me, Miss Hal.”

“Then I’ll just have to tell you how amazing you are every day!”

Smiling with each other, the two left the Research Institute fields.

Afterword

Hello, long time no see. This is Milli-gram.

Thank you so much for buying *I'll Never Set Foot in That House Again!* volume 5. This time, to celebrate Chelsea coming of age in the Kingdom of Chronowize, I had her outfit completely changed. I hope you enjoy her attempts at becoming a little bit more like an adult.

Now, let me get to my usual thanks...

Thank you Yuki Kana-sensei for the wonderful illustrations. My editor, Y-san, who always watches over me warmly. Everyone in sales, the proofreaders, designers, printers, the bookstores carrying *I'll Never Set Foot*. R-san, for giving me ideas, M-san, my mother, and everyone who picked up this book. Thank you all so much!

Though the world is fraught with terrible things like the COVID-19 pandemic, earthquakes, and blizzards, I hope that everyone who had anything to do with this book stays healthy!

Milli-gram

5

Author

Milli-gram

Illustrator

Yuki Kana



*I'll Never Set Foot in
That House Again!*



Nemophilia

One of the Grand Saintess candidates. Well-versed with attack magic.

Chelsea

A noble lady who saved many lives with her rare Skill [Seed Creation].

Mimosa

One of the Grand Saintess candidates. Has a defensive magic Skill.

Amaryllis

One of the Grand Saintess candidates. Adept at swordsmanship.



<Good evening, Lord Glen.
Can you hear me?>

I asked, always nervous
when I started the
conversation.

<Good evening, Chelsea.
I can hear you.>

Bonus Short Stories

One Day in the Lab

A few days after my coming-of-age celebration, I was in my lab, holding the pen-shaped magic tool I'd received as my Flower Gift.

«What are you doing?» Ele asked, floating up to me in his cat form.

“I thought I'd try making some test sketches...”

When devising my blueprints, I needed to draw the plant's seeds, sprouts, stalks, and leaves. My drawing skills left much to be desired, so I'd decided to practice using the magic pen that could both draw and erase in the air.

First, I drew a round seed that sprouted into budding leaves, then beside it, the sprout turned into true leaves.

«Oho... A pen that draws midair...» Ele murmured, moving next to the image of the leaves and poking it with his claws. The leaf lightly fluttered, as if blown by the wind, before fixing itself to the sprout.

Wow! Not only did the picture move, but it attached itself to my sprout drawing?!

Reacting to my shock, Ele smirked. «If it can attach, then it can also come apart,» he said, using his claws to separate the images. Before I could fully grasp what he was doing, he continued ripping apart the leaf picture with his claws.

“Huh?!”

The clawed-up parts became simple lines, and Ele moved them around to make a cat.

«I've drawn myself,» he said, floating upright and proudly putting a paw to his hip.

“The leaf turned into kitty Ele!” I gasped. *So I can change my magic pen drawings like that!*

«Why not try it yourself, Lady Chelsea?»

“Okay, I will!”

First, I used my pen to draw a bunch of lines midair to use. Then, I took hold of the floating lines, folding, twisting, and cutting them to size.

“This is harder than I thought...” I mumbled to myself.

Ele whispered, «Are you trying to draw Glen?»

I nodded, embarrassed. I didn't think he'd realize it so quickly!

«To draw Glen, you should flip his hair out here and make that

ear-thing of his.»

Following Ele's advice, I put together something that loosely resembled Lord Glen. As I sighed in relief that I'd finished, I heard a voice come from behind me.

"You seem to be trying something fun."

"Wha?! Lord Glen?!" I hadn't heard him knock or come in.

«I noticed him entering the room,» Ele piped up, floating next to the picture.

Oh no! He's going to see my drawing of him! I quickly grabbed the bottom of the midair drawing and hid it behind me.

"Did you draw that with your pen? So you can move the lines around like that, huh?" Lord Glen said, using one arm to hug me and the other to lift up the drawing I'd tried to hide. I couldn't even reach it... "Is this...me?"

I nodded, my face burning.

"I'm glad that you drew *me*," he commented happily.

As the two of us smiled at each other, Ele floated up in front of Lord Glen's face, bringing the cat picture he'd drawn of himself with him.

«There's a picture of me too!»

Lord Glen sputtered out a laugh at how proud the Spirit was. "It looks just like you."

It was true. The picture Ele had drawn was really good. *I'll have to practice more!*

Flan À La Mode

On the days off between our hands-on practice, the Grand Saintess candidates and I had tea parties in the Central Manor's greenhouse. The order in which we sat was the same as always: Lady Amaryllis to the east, Lady Nemophila to the west, Lady Mimosa to the south, and me in the north.

"I forgot to ask when we introduced ourselves, but what do you like, Lady Chelsea?" Lady Mimosa asked.

I put a hand to my chin in thought. *The first thing that comes to mind is Lord Glen...but it'd be too embarrassing to say that here...* Unable to quickly think of an alternative, I struggled with how to respond.

Lady Amaryllis giggled and gave me a teasing smile. "Since it is you we are talking about, Lady Chelsea, you likely thought of your fiancé, did you not?"

She knew! Even without me saying anything! I quickly snapped my hands to my face, hiding my burning cheeks.

"You should've worded the question more specifically," Lady Nemophila said, looking at me with concern. "How about, what is

your favorite food?"

After taking a deep breath to calm myself down, I answered. "My favorite food is flan. I like it when it's soft and creamy, or a little firmer with more eggs used—or even when the outside is a little bit brown."

"You must really love flan, Lady Chelsea," Lady Amaryllis commented, receiving a firm nod from me in return.

"My latest favorite version is the flan à la mode that my personal chef Miss Micah makes for me," I added.

"Flan à la mode?" the Grand Saintess candidate trio repeated, tilting their heads questioningly.

"What's that?" Lady Nemophila asked.

"Basically, it's a plate of flan about this big with various bite-size pieces of fruit and cream on top," I explained, using both of my hands to show the size of the plate. "Depending on the day, she may include pancakes, scones, or waffles alongside it."

Lady Mimosa put a hand to her mouth, clearly unable to hold back. "Now that you've explained it, I really wanna try some!"

"Would you like me to ask Miss Micah to make us flan for our next tea party?" I asked, sure that Miss Micah would be thrilled to do so.

The trio all leaned in with excitement.

"You would do that for us?"

"I'd love for you to ask."

"Really? I can't wait!"

"All right, I'll ask her," I replied, giggling.

On our next day off, a few days later...

"So *this* is flan à la mode!" Lady Mimosa's eyes sparkled as she stared at the treat.

We were gathered at the usual Central Manor greenhouse.

"Today, Miss Micah used strawberries, bananas, and oranges for the fruit." I pointed out the desserts lined up on the table.

Lady Nemophila glanced over at me. "Can we eat them?"

"Of course." I nodded, signaling the trio to dig in.

"It looks so fancy!"

"I don't know if it's the acidity from the fruits or what, but I feel like I could eat a ton of this..."

"The flan and cream are so delicious together!"

The Grand Saintess candidate trio each gave their comments, and in the blink of an eye, finished their treats.

It feels good to have other people enjoy my favorite food! I thought to myself, a smile on my face that remained the rest of the day.

What Do They Mean by “Clothes That Are Easy to Move in”? (Best Read after Finishing the Main Story)

After we'd had our hands-on training in battle and camping...

In the Northern Manor's dining hall, I was asking my personal attendants about what I ought to wear.

“During the Floral Crucible, the three Grand Saintess candidates will be protecting me as we go through the Shrine of Trials,” I explained. “I'm worried that if I wear the dress I'm in now, the bottom of the skirt might bump into whatever's around me...”

Gina, my head maid, put a hand to her chin and nodded. “If they're protecting you through the shrine, you'll be close enough together that it might hit them. We'll prepare some clothing for you that won't get in their way—while still being easy to move in.”

“What kind of clothing?” I asked. I couldn't think of anything easier to move in than a one-piece dress.

My maids each spoke up with their ideas.

“If you wore something like a short tunic, I don't believe you would hit anything around you.”

“And if you're wearing a tunic, pants would probably be best.”

“Yes, pants would also be good in case of a fall.”

I knew what pants were, of course, but I had no idea what a tunic looked like. I tilted my head questioningly, and Martha, who had vanished at some point, returned to the dining hall with some clothes.

“This is a tunic,” she said. She held a piece of clothing with a longer hem than a normal shirt but still shorter than a dress.

“You're right. I don't think this will flare out, so it won't knock against anything.” I nodded, deciding on the tunic.

And so, the day we were to head to the Shrine of Trials came.

In my room, I changed into the clothes that my maids had prepared. My outfit consisted of a knee-length tunic with slits on both sides, a vest over it to keep me warm, and pants made with a thicker fabric around the knees in case I fell. Lastly, I had on boots selected with ease of movement in mind. I tried bending, stretching, and walking around a little bit. The clothes were much easier to move in than I'd expected.

“It's really easy to move in! I'm ready to go whenever,” I said with a smile.

Martha gave her head a shake. “No, you're not ready yet.”

“Huh?” I blurted out in surprise. A nearby maid then sat me down in front of the dresser mirror.

“We need to put your hair up in a style that's easy to move in as well,” Martha said, arranging my hair instantly.

The hairstyle had the hair near my face neatly braided, with the

rest of my hair pulled into two low pigtails.

“We all discussed hairstyles and decided that this would be best for keeping out of the way,” she explained as the other maids nodded.

Low pigtails was the same style that Miss Micah wore her hair in. Since she was my maid-slash-personal chef, she moved around more than the other maids. They might have chosen pigtails based on hers.

“I match Miss Micah,” I commented, turning around.

Miss Micah, who had been off to the side, started wagging her tail so vigorously that I thought it might come right off.

“I’m happy we match~!” she said.

If she’s that happy about it, I’ll have to find an excuse to wear pigtails again, I thought to myself as I headed out to take on the Floral Crucible.

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I'll Never Set Foot in That House Again! Volume 5
by Milli-gram

Translated by Emily Hemphill
Edited by Meiru

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